Anthropological Theory Today

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1 Anthropological Theory at the Turn of the Century

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What is anthropological theory?

It is very tempting to begin a book of this kind with the statement that there is no such thing as anthropological theory. This temptation is not simply an idle or mischievous one, but stems from three interrelated problems: what is anthropological about anthropological theory?; what do anthropological theories theorize about?; and why have so many anthropologists in the last ten years repudiated theory in favour of ethnography? These questions are further complicated by the fact that anthropologists are often very unclear about the distinction between a generalization and a theory, and thus confusions arise about degrees of abstraction or, more precisely, about the relationship between observations, normative assumptions and theoretical propositions.[1] Such confusions have only been deepened by debates in the last ten years or so about the purpose and pretexts of anthropological knowledge. The inclusion of the anthropologist and their role in knowledge construction within the parameters of theoretical critique has had the effect, among other things, of linking anthropology as a practice to questions of power, domination and discrimination in ways that have highlighted moral and ethical dilemmas for practitioners individually and collectively. The results have been diverse, but in some sense have involved not only a retreat from theory, but even from the project of anthropology itself (Moore, 1997). However, the situation as the millennium approaches has improved with several calls for a renewal of theoretical thinking in the discipline and an emerging note of optimism

about the future of anthropology (cf. Knauft, 1996 and 1997; Hastrup, 1995 and 1997; Moore, 1996a and 1997; Reyna, 1997; Benthall, 1995; Strathern, 1995).[2] It would probably be wise to retain a degree of scepticism about a sense of progress and renewal occurring at such a conveniently millennial moment, but nonetheless anthropology as a discipline and a practice has faced new challenges in the last two decades and new theories and new forms of theorizing have emerged and are taking discernible shape in response.

Anthropology as discipline and practice

In order to characterize this response, it is first necessary to say something about the nature of anthropological theory. One way to do this is to try and formulate a reply to the question 'What do anthropological theories theorize about?' Standard rejoinders usually include 'culture', 'other cultures', 'cultural difference', 'ways of life', 'social systems' and 'world views'; more abstract formulations might include power, difference, diversity, agency and representation; while more concrete responses might list, for example, family forms, political structures, livelihoods and forms of faith. The question 'What is anthropological theory?' is demonstrably tied to the question 'What is anthropology?', as all these responses indicate. The problem here is that none of the things included in such lists, whether as empirical entities or as theoretical concepts, are exclusively the domain of anthropology (see Thomas, chapter 10 below), and this immediately raises difficulties of how to delineate and specify the anthropological object of study. Such difficulties are, of course, common to all the other disciplines in the social sciences whose domains of enquiry not only overlap, but are implicated in each other. What makes anthropology anthropology is not a specific object of enquiry, but the history of anthropology as a discipline and a practice.

In this sense anthropology is anthropology because it is a specific formal mode of enquiry, and one which deals not just with 'cultural difference', 'other cultures' and 'social systems', but with how those differences and social systems are embedded in hierarchical relations of power. Anthropological discourses have determinate historical conditions which provide the wider institutional and discursive spaces in which its theories and practices are inscribed (Scott, 1992: 372–3). This was true of anthropology in the past and is true of the discipline now. However, to make this point is not just to subscribe to simplistic versions of this view, such as anthropology in the past was 'the handmaiden of colonialism'. There are many instances in anthropology's history when individuals and anthropological practices and discourses were co-opted for political ends –

this is true of all academic disciplines – but to understand anthropology as a disciplinary project within determinate historical conditions requires more insight than simply cataloguing such abuses. The fundamental point is that anthropology as a discipline and a practice is part of an imaginary that helps to shape the relationship between the West and its Others (Scott, 1992: 387–8). This relationship is not a static one, and has undergone considerable changes in the last few decades (see below). These historical changes have had a profound impact on the theory and practice of anthropology.

One consequence has been a reconfiguration of the boundaries between academic and non-academic practice. Anthropology is no longer, if it ever was, confined within the academy, but is increasingly part of the practice and theory of development agencies, voluntary organizations, international organizations and governments (cf. Karim, 1996). In short, it is part of the practice of governmentality (Moore, 1996b). Again, this observation has to be distinguished from more simplistic versions of the utility argument; in other words that anthropology has a long history of wanting to make itself useful to governments and that this inspired the rise of a specific sub-field called development anthropology (cf. Grillo and Rew, 1985). The more pertinent point is that anthropology as theory and practice cannot be confined within the academy, but neither can the academy be insulated from the uses to which anthropological theorizing, data and practice are put in other contexts. This is not only true with regard to the practices of government, but also in relation to such things as popular culture, consumption practices and body art (see Moore, chapter 6 below).

'Neither a borrower nor a lender be'

If the development of the discipline of anthropology is not immune to the material and imaginary purposes anthropological data and theory serve elsewhere, then how are we to respond to the question 'What is anthropological about anthropological theory?' Anthropological theories are clearly not unique to anthropology. This is obvious both from the fact that most anthropological theory courses begin by teaching students the basics of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, and from the extensive theoretical borrowing anthropology engages in, the most recent examples include the work of Bourdieu, Foucault, Bakhtin and Gramsci. When Clifford Geertz (1983) referred nearly twenty years ago to 'the blurring of genres', he had in mind not only the breakdown of disciplinary boundaries, but anthropology's adoption of concepts and theories from philosophy and the humanities. This process of adoption and incorporation has never been new –

after all Lévi-Strauss's structuralism was based on the borrowing of theories from structural linguistics – but it has arguably increased over the last twenty years, and has been accompanied by greater specialization. Thus, if once anthropological enquiry could be divided into the domains of kinship, politics, economics and religion, or into archaeology, socio-cultural anthropology, biological anthropology and linguistics, the present situation is considerably more diverse, with a proliferation of specialist sub-fields, such as the anthropology of development, organizations, education, theatre and performance, nutrition, cognition, psychoanalysis, psychology, gender and medical anthropology, to mention only a few. All these sub-fields borrow theories extensively from other disciplines and require degrees of theoretical specialism. In addition, the study of various 'topics' in anthropology also requires specialist theoretical knowledge and typically involves borrowing from other disciplines or from particular intellectual traditions or critiques that cross-cut the disciplines of the humanities and the social sciences (e.g. feminist theory or political economy). Such topics include – to list only a few – the body, memory, the household, the person, land, consumption, nationalism, violence and art. The boundaries between 'sub-fields' and 'topics' are never fixed and are a matter of contestation within the discipline, where proponents constantly announce the arrival of a new sub-field of 'anthropology of . . .'.

This new degree of theoretical specialization has increased diversity within the discipline and is thought by some to have begun its fragmentation. Thus we cannot speak of 'anthropological theory' because anthropology is both everything and nothing. Sherry Ortner described the discipline fifteen years ago as 'a thing of shreds and patches' (1984: 126) with regard to theory. She discussed the impact of Marxism, structuralism and symbolic interpretativism on the discipline and identified varieties of practice theory as the way forward. The theories she was referring to – while not confined to anthropology – were larger intellectual trends or approaches that cross-cut and informed, albeit to different degrees, the various 'sub-fields' or 'topics' of the discipline. Is it currently possible to identify such larger trends in contemporary anthropology? The straightforward answer is 'yes' (cf. Knauft, 1996). Practice theories continue to inform many theoretical projects across the range of anthropological endeavours, and much of this work draws implicitly and explicitly on the work of Bourdieu, De Certeau and Giddens, as well as making use of phenomenological theories. Issues of power and domination continue to be central to the discipline, and while being post-Marxist in the straightforward sense of the term, just as practice theories are post-structuralist, much work draws directly on Foucault, Gramsci and Bakhtin.[3] A key concern with subjectivities, their lived constructions and resistances to forms of power and control is evident in the way scholars draw on the

work of Foucault, subaltern theories and feminist theory. Broad trends are in evidence, but even since 1984, when Sherry Ortner published her article, it has become clear that it is no longer possible to speak of coherent theoretical approaches that are neatly delineated from others. Theories are themselves more composite, more partial and more eclectic.

Post-modernism and the crisis of representation

There is a tremendous irony here because one of the reasons why this is so is because of the impact of one particular set of theories on the humanities and social sciences in the last two decades (cf. Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler, 1992; Seidman, 1994).[4] This set of theories was variously labelled deconstructionist, post-structuralist and post-modernist, and in anthropology these theories inaugurated a critique of languages of representation, and insisted on the partiality and partialness of observations and locations, and the contingency and fragmentation of cultures, selves and histories. Their benefits and shortcomings for anthropology were vigorously debated by a relatively small group of scholars in the discipline in the 1980s and early 1990s (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Clifford, 1988; Kapferer, 1988; Ulin, 1991; Polier and Roseberry, 1989; Sangren, 1988; Gellner, 1992; Roth, 1989). These debates, which had continuities with earlier disputes about the relative merits of interpretative versus scientific approaches in the discipline, focused on issues of the politics and pragmatics of representation replayed as antinomies between objectivism and subjectivism, and empiricism and social construction. However, the consequences of these debates were important for theoretical development in anthropology in a number of ways, all of which relate to the larger question 'What is anthropological about anthropological theory?'

One of the most notable features of the post-modernist/deconstructionist debate in anthropology, as elsewhere, was that it was anti-theory, in the sense that it provided a critique of the exclusionary practices of Western theorizing and explicitly eschewed 'grand theories' and 'meta-narratives' on the grounds that they homogenized differences. This had two consequences in anthropology: the first may be characterized in general terms as a reformulation of anthropological practices, and the second as a redefinition of the notion of theory itself. What connected these two processes was an emerging critique of the authority of the anthropologist as author, an insistence on the partiality and partialness of all interpretations, and a profound questioning of the assumptions and techniques used to develop and convey cultural representations and interpretations. This 'crisis of representation' was experienced by all the disciplines of the

human sciences, but its particular inflection within anthropology was specifically tied to the geopolitics of West/Other relations and to anthropology's own fraught, but essential engagement with those relations. Anthropology occupies a discursive and practical space defined by West/Other relations, and no amount of critiques of 'othering' will ever alter that fact. Anthropology must on no account vacate that space because to do so would be to give up on the possibility of a critical politics and a critical ethics linked to an understanding of the way the world currently is and to the multifarious ways in which people are living out their lives.

However, at the beginning of the debate on the 'crisis of representation' in the 1980s, this point did not seem to be evident in anthropology, but what was clear was that anthropology's largely unquestioned and unexamined liberal values were being revealed as ethnocentric. This situation was a profoundly uncomfortable one for many anthropologists who tried, in vain, to resolve what was a political dilemma, albeit reconfigured as a moral one and often intensely felt on a personal level, through modifying their forms of writing and forms of fieldwork practice. In a sense this project was doomed to failure because modifications in rhetorical and personal praxis were insufficient to the larger task of developing a critical politics for the discipline (Moore, 1997: 129).

Why should this be so? The answer is really that although the post-modernist/deconstructionist debate in the discipline was of immense benefit and did result in changes in disciplinary practice and the textual representation of that practice – even in the work of anthropologists who were avowedly unsympathetic to the principles of the critique – the initial protagonists in the debate failed to acknowledge adequately that ethics is a matter of theory as well as of method (Moore, 1997: 126).[5] The critique of representation and the accompanying repudiation of 'grand theory' led to some practitioners in the discipline of anthropology apparently eschewing theory and generalization, and turning definitively to ethnography and the practice of fieldwork: empiricism and experience as solutions to the problems of representation and theory. Ethnography was the way out for anthropologists because it is the space in which we remain committed to a shared dialogue with the subjects of our enquiry and in which we have an opportunity to practice a personal ethics that can be dissociated to a degree from anthropology's complicitous history with the exclusionary practices and sanctioned ignorances of Western theorizing.

The turn to ethnography was a defensive gesture, but its benefits were illusory, in the sense that it could only displace, not resolve, the problem. The vituperative debate between the social constructionists – ethnography is fiction – and the ethnographic empiricists – anthropology is a science – often caricatured the careful way in which many anthropologists were trying to theorize not only anthropology's history and disci-

plinary assumptions, but the role of the anthropologist in knowledge construction. The fundamental tension within anthropology is that it is equally reliant on interpretative representation and on ethnography. This tension constitutes the discipline, and thus cannot be resolved either through a turn to ethnography or through a turn to interpretation. Anthropology is based on the irresolvable tension between 'the need to separate oneself from the world and render it up as an object of experience, and the desire to lose oneself within this object world and experience it directly' (Mitchell, 1988: 29). This tension is encapsulated in the method of participant-observation, and has been clearly demonstrated in the anthropological theorizing over the last twenty years which has given increasing emphasis to cultural construction, while simultaneously emphasizing praxis and phenomenology (see Csordas, chapter 7 below).

The problem for anthropology then is that a retreat to ethnographic particularism could never be an appropriate response to the charge that modernist meta-theories were exclusionary, hierarchical and homogenizing. Valuing cultural difference requires theory; assessing the connections between forms of cultural difference and hierarchical relations of power requires theory; linking personal experiences to processes of globalization and fragmentation requires theory. That is why anthropological theories, while they must be grounded in the particularities of lives lived, can never be isomorphic with them.

If the post-modernist/deconstructionist debate forced anthropology to rethink aspects of its practice, but did so in ways that encouraged a retreat from theory, then in what sense could this debate also be said to have brought about a redefinition of the notion of theory itself? The first point, of course, is that the retreat from theory was only ever a partial one and was, like the retreat to ethnography, somewhat illusory. During the whole period when anthropology was apparently eschewing theory, it was in fact continuing to produce theories. The post-modernists and/or deconstructionists were certainly producing theory, since they were introducing these ideas into anthropology.[6] Many other anthropologists were influenced by such theories, but continued to apply specific theoretical questions to fine-grained ethnographic data, as part of a process both of developing new insights into specific questions and of interrogating disciplinary concepts and assumptions.[7] This is very much in the historical tradition of anthropology which has in various periods subjected its own disciplinary assumptions and concepts to anthropological scrutiny. Anthropologists have long been aware that one of the goals of anthropological theorizing is to scrutinize our constructions via the detour of the other.[8] This is not a cynical use of other people's perspectives, but a mechanism for bringing cultures into relation with each other, within a critical framework. This process was intensified by the post-modernist/

deconstructionist debate in anthropology because of the emphasis placed on the role of the anthropologist in knowledge construction, the importance of positionality, and the partialness of interpretations. The result, however, was not just that key concepts like culture came under renewed scrutiny, but that the very conditions of possibility of anthropology itself were interrogated, what we might better call the pre-theoretical assumptions and values that make the discipline and its practice possible. The idea, for example, that cultures can be compared because they have independent existences.

The interrogation of the discipline's pre-theoretical assumptions and values did not take place in a vacuum, and two particular developments are of importance here. The first is that in the last twenty years or so anthropology has 'come home': it has increasingly turned to the study of communities in Western nations, and thus the pronouncements of the academy have been less and less isolated from the communities studied. But, processes of globalization and population movements have meant that communities 'at home' are increasingly culturally diverse: 'other cultures' are no longer confined to 'other parts' of the world. These changes in anthropology's object of study have been paralleled by a second development, and that is a change in the nature of the academy itself. If some of the cultures and communities studied by anthropologists are now transnational and translocational, then so too are anthropologists. It is the anthropologists and not just the informants who are post-colonials. This has had a major impact on debates on the role of the anthropologist in knowledge construction and on the development of a critical politics in the discipline. Issues of hybridity and positionality have been largely forced onto the agenda in anthropological theorizing by feminist, native and minority scholars in the discipline, and by those anthropologists who live the hybridity of multiple locations and subjectivities most acutely. As the world is simultaneously globalized and localized, so too is the discipline and practice of anthropology.

The post-modernist/deconstructionist debate in anthropology might have had a marked influence on the discipline, but it has done so under determinate historical conditions and in the context of the emergence of new discursive spaces. These new discursive spaces are both inside and outside anthropology itself. A number of commentators (e.g. Knauft, 1996 and 1997; Scott, 1992) have pointed out that as anthropology responded to post-modernist theories arriving from literary studies and the humanities and began the process of deconstructing anthropological texts, scholars from the humanities and literary studies moved into the domain of culture and from this emerged cultural studies, cultural criticism, post-colonial studies, multi-culturalism, black cultural studies, queer theory and other hybrid enquiries into forms of culturalism and things cultural

(see the chapters by Thomas, Battaglia and Moore below). These approaches have as many differences as they share similarities, but they all in one way or another draw on difference theories, on issues surrounding the politics of identity, as well as engaging with processes of globalization, hybridity and cultural transformation. Anthropology's relation to these intellectual developments has been mixed (see Thomas, chapter 10 below). The discipline has remained both nervous and cautious about these 'newcomers' into the area of its traditional domain of enquiry 'culture' (Rosaldo, 1994; Turner, 1993; Harvey, 1996). New understandings of culture assert not just its contested nature, but the fact that cultures are mobile, unbounded, open-ended and hybrid. It is not just that anthropology can no longer be defined as the discipline that studies 'other cultures' and cultural forms – because so many others do too – but also that its very object of study, culture, is rapidly transforming.

How this book works

The changing nature of anthropology and of anthropological theory thus poses particular challenges for a book entitled *Anthropological Theory Today*. It is not just that there is no longer, if there ever was, a single anthropology, and that there are no coherent sets of uniquely anthropological theories, but rather that the nature of the theoretical is itself in question.' Theory is now a diverse set of critical strategies which incorporates within itself a critique of its own locations, positions and interests: that is, it is highly reflexive. This notion of theory – which is the legacy of a moment of high post-modernism/deconstruction – underpins multifarious intellectual projects across a range of disciplines. It self-identifies as the meta-critique of all critiques, as a field of nomadic critical operations that undermines any attempt to authenticate cultures, selves and histories. This view of theory is itself a myth or rather only a moment in a larger critical strategy. It too can be critiqued, as it acknowledges, for its own pre-theoretical assumptions: its constituting concepts and values. What this book attempts is not a comprehensive theoretical overview of the field of anthropology – such a task would be impossible, as well as undesirable. Rather, it sets out through a series of essays to demonstrate the ways in which anthropology and anthropological theorizing are changing in response to changes inside and outside the academy. It locates anthropological theorizing within a set of determinate historical conditions, but does not do so through an overview or synthesis of those conditions. It attempts instead to provide examples of anthropologists working theory in response to their readings of those conditions and their positions within them. It discusses the use of some of the key concept metaphors that organize critique within the discipline – such

as gender, self and body – but chooses to demonstrate how theory works with certain concept metaphors rather than providing a synthesis of all concept metaphors within the discipline – another impossible task in any event. It examines the question of how anthropology borrows, appropriates and transforms theories from other disciplines and/or from broader intellectual critiques through examples of how this works in certain contexts, as seen from the perspective of particular authors, and not as part of a huge list or extensive genealogy of such borrowings and relations. Through the range of theoretical thinking they present, the essays in this volume demonstrate the composite nature of anthropological theorizing, and show how different kinds of theories work at different levels of scope and abstraction. The guiding principle of this book – if it can be said to have one – is that it is not a synthesis, it is an intervention in a debate, as well as in a set of practices labelled anthropology.

The landscape of debate: A contested terrain

The global and the local: culture and political economy

Many anthropologists have emphasized the importance of locating ethnography within a globalized world, and have stressed that this involves documenting the impact of large-scale processes on subjectivities and communities, but doing so in a way that demonstrates the specific and evolving nature of local responses (cf. Strathern, 1995; James, 1995; Miller, 1995). In contrast to a post-modern perspective that hyper-valorizes difference, and in counterpoint to the anti-theory stance of the post-modern critique in anthropology, this approach insists that documenting political and economic struggles, changing livelihoods, individual and collective identities, experiences of disempowerment, spiritualities and world views demands a commitment both to detailed scholarship (ethnography) and to analytical rigour (critical theory). There is a generally acknowledged view in anthropology that the context in which the discipline is operating has changed and is continuing to change. As a number of commentators have made clear, there are identifiable features of a late modern and globalized world (Giddens, 1991 and 1994; Waters, 1995; Kearney, 1995), all of which have had a major impact not just on anthropology's practice, but on the discipline's pre-theoretical commitments. These changes may be broadly characterized as:[10]

- Increasing articulation of industrialization with domestic commodity production, with service and marketing industries, and with electronic and mass media economy

- Political and economic shifts from centralization to decentralization, post-Fordist or flexible accumulation, and trans-national influence at the expense of nation-state autonomy
- Increasing disparities of wealth, health and well-being both within and across communities articulated with race, class, ethnic, gender and religious difference
- Increasing communities of identity and imagination across space and time, often involving huge movements of people and the development of diasporic (trans-national or trans-locational) communities
- Increase of information, information flow and communication speed, associated with time-space compression and the increased movement of people and ideas
- Increase in conflict, violence and warfare, associated with a nexus of poverty, discrimination and cultural politics.

These features of globalization are well reconized, but they have prompted new work in anthropology on the cultural dimensions of globalization, and thus on two old questions: 'What is culture?' and 'How does one study the relation between cultures?' (Friedman, 1994; Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1992). There is general agreement that globalization has not produced cultural homogenization, but is creating new cultural configurations through which people are living out new subjectivities and social relations. As Kearney says (1995: 551) 'contemporary anthropological global theory is innovating theories of culture, social organization, and identity for global and transnational persons and communities'. Diversity and difference are being given new meaning, and whereas once we might have been able to align cultural and other differences with the spatial metaphors of centre/periphery, us/them, processes of production, consumption and identity formation that were once the result of capitalism's impact on the periphery have now flowed back and transformed the so-called centre (Kearney, 1995: 554). Cultures are becoming both deterritoralized and reterritorialized: they are no longer predicated on particular spatial co-ordinates, but neither are they adrift from the particularities of lives lived. Cultures are extended across space and time, and formed through new media and coalitions of shifting identities and understandings. The anthropological terrain of culture has shifted: new forms of public culture are emerging, as are new ideas about what it means to be 'modern', a citizen, an individual.

Such new work in anthropology figures culture as a series of sites of contested representation and resistance within fields of power. The notion of culture as an autonomous entity has been undermined, and that critique has inevitably resulted in a challenge to other spatialized entities

and the identities predicated upon them: for example, the nation-state (cf. Ong and Nonini, 1997). Aihwa Ong takes up this theme in her chapter in this volume and discusses how the traditional anthropological notion of culture encouraged a view of non-Western societies as communitarian in character as opposed to the individualistic values of Western cultures. She argues that understanding the relationship between cultural values and societal forms requires a notion of cultural politics premised on revisions of the notions of culture, state and citizen. The hierarchical dualisms of earlier forms of analysis – modern/non-modern, individualistic/communitarian, secular/religious, state/kin-based societies – which are implicit in the traditional anthropological notion of culture and a defining feature of a traditional political anthropology are inappropriate for understanding forms of political control, economic development and cultural values in the contemporary societies of South-East Asia.

James Carrier and Daniel Miller discuss the relationship between the global and the local, between macro- and micro-processes, from the perspective of a reformulated economic anthropology. They reaffirm the importance of anthropology's commitment both to theoretical models and to the particularities of individual and collective agency. They point out that a particular notion of 'the economy' is a defining feature of how Westerners understand themselves as Westerners, and view themselves as 'moderns'. Contemporary anthropology needs to deconstruct this notion of the economy, and Carrier and Miller proceed to do this through a repositioning of the relationship between economy and morality in the context of an anthropological critique of the discipline of economics.

The chapters by Ong and Carrier and Miller critique the spatialization implicit in the pre-theoretical commitments of the notions of the political and the economic, and show how those notions are tied to Western understandings of Western societies in ways that threaten to occlude how others in other contexts conceptualize and operationalize the relationship between cultural values, local identities and economic and political processes (cf. Ong, 1996). The chapter by Lutz and Nonini addresses the relationship between the local and the global from yet another perspective. Their concern is with how trans-national economic and political processes have transformed people's livelihoods and increased levels of conflict, violence and warfare. They too demonstrate the necessity of a commitment both to theoretical models that can make sense of the specifics in each locality and to the ethnographic specifics upon which generalizations must be based. Their work shows how aspects of identities and subjectivities – gender, race and class – are co-opted, inflected and intensified through the operations of power constitutive of economic and political processes (cf. Yanagisako and Delaney, 1995; Ginsburg and Rapp, 1995; Alexander and Mohanty, 1997).

Social justice and cultural relativism

Lutz and Nonini's chapter raises the question of anthropology's commitment to documenting forms of social, economic and political exploitation and discrimination and their consequences for people's lives and aspirations. Such a commitment is of long standing in anthropology and is an inevitable part of the history of a discipline concerned with understanding cultural and social difference in the context of hierarchical power relations and the inequalities of geopolitics. Knauft has recently called for a 'critical humanism', which he defines both as a commitment to document the richness of people's lives and to 'expose, analyze, and critique human inequality and domination' (Knauft, 1996: 50). Forms of inequality and domination are intertwined, not always hegemonic and sometimes conflicting. This means that the specifics of inequality – race, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, caste – have to be studied on the ground, and that the material dimensions of inequality and domination have to be linked to forms of knowledge, discourse and representation (Knauft, 1996: 50–1; Scheper-Hughes, 1992). This is a goal with which many practitioners can identify, but within the complex political and ethical field in which anthropology as a practice and a discourse is located, good intentions do not always produce good results.

Recent debate on this point has been heated, with some anthropologists calling for high-quality, objective ethnography on the grounds that the role of the anthropologist as scientist is to speak truth to power. In this context D'Andrade argues that any claim anthropology might have to moral authority 'rests on knowing *empirical* truths' (D'Andrade, 1995: 403), and thus one should keep objective and moral models separate. This is because the aim of a moral model is to allocate praise or blame and this shapes its cognitive character, while the purpose of an objective model is to gain a surer understanding of what is actually happening (D'Andrade, 1995: 408). Other anthropologists decry this suggestion and point out that there is no such thing as value-free enquiry, and therefore it is impossible to keep moral and objective models separate. This debate is, of course, a version of an older debate in anthropology about interpretation versus science, what gives it new impetus is a renewed interest in the thorny problem of cultural relativism.

In some sense, the recent debate on cultural relativism is a reaction to what many practitioners now feel was the apoliticism of post-modern theories. Such theories theorized difference, but effectively gave equal value to all differences. The result was a form of general political paralysis. In order to understand what is happening to people's lives, it is not enough to focus on fragmentation and particularism; there has to be some acknow-

ledgement that hierarchical relations of power and domination set a larger context within which the particularities of lives are lived. If individuals and collectivities are to challenge relations of power, they cannot do so by asserting that each situation is unique and that there are no common discourses or understandings to link experiences and situations. Thus the politics of a 'critical humanism' or what Scheper-Hughes (1995) has called a 'militant anthropology' is closely allied to recent theoretical trends in anthropology that call for a marriage of detailed ethnography and robust theory (see above).

Scheper-Hughes argues that anthropological work must be based on an explicit ethical orientation to 'the other', and that the role of the anthropologist is not to stand on the side-lines, but to witness, to speak out about what is going on (Scheper-Hughes, 1995: 418–19). Again, this is a position with which many anthropologists can identify; the problem comes in the recognition that the practice of anthropology is always an intervention, and that speaking out involves not just witnessing, but intervening. Anthropologists, like others, cannot control the effects of their interventions, and good intentions do not always produce good results. To say this is to say little more than that moral action is always flawed, and the fact that something is flawed is not necessarily a reason for abandoning it. However, it is a reason for subjecting it to sustained critical reflection. Moral convictions always have to be tempered with a relativist stance in anthropology – albeit a temporary one – because if they are not then understanding is precluded in favour of judgement.

However, whenever we engage in discussion about morality and engagement in anthropology, we need to maintain a critical awareness of the cultural values that underpin the pre-theoretical commitments implicit in such discussions. Terms like objectivity and morality imply universal attributes which are part not only of liberal Western discourses, but are also a constitutive factor in the making of Western culture in its distinction from other cultures, and thus, of course, a constitutive part in the creation of the possibility of anthropology as a discipline and a practice (Ong, 1995 and 1996; chapter 3 below). Anthropology's engagement with 'other cultures' means an engagement with other values and pre-theoretical commitments, it does not mean a collapsing of distinctions between value frames or the permanent withdrawal of the possibility of value judgement.

These are not issues on which there is ever likely to be complete agreement in anthropology, and in fact one should not wish for agreement in these areas if one is in favour of a self-reflexive and critical anthropology. Such an anthropology must necessarily be plural and partial, but one should not mistake either position for disengagement.

Agency and self-reflexivity

In her chapter in this volume, Debbora Battaglia argues – not unlike Scheper-Hughes (1995) – that the ethics of anthropology is bound up with ethnography as a discourse of responsibility, in the sense of a discourse of reflexive awareness achieved across difference. This proposition finds resonances for many anthropologists, some of whom have pointed out that the alternative to attention to difference is indifference, and that forms of indifference are at the root of murderous assertions of cultural and individual particularity. Battaglia's chapter opens up questions of agency and self-reflexivity from the point of view both of the anthropologist and the anthropological subject. Her argument thus situates the discourse of anthropology within the wider context of anthropology understood as cultural practice. Her questioning focuses on the notion of self as a grounding concept-metaphor both for the anthropologist and the anthropological subject as agent. Her position is that the self is always a representational economy, an image of integration that strives, but fails, to encompass the diversity of experiences and subject positions. Battaglia's chapter demonstrates how a concept-metaphor like the self informs the agency of subjects – including that of the anthropologist – and yet is not a given, a stable and natural entity. Understanding the agency of others and how they act in the contemporary world is thus a matter of comprehending the spaces and oscillations between integrating notions and diverse experiences. Selfhood is a situationally, not essentially, defined project.

The question of how identities and subjectivities are formed in diverse situations is one of the major challenges of contemporary ethnography, and in a sense it is a continuation of older debates about the relationship between structure and agency. What is different is the way in which anthropological theory now tries to locate the agency of the anthropologist within the same frame as the agency of others, and thus to develop new forms of social engagement that ensure a radical departure from the earlier situations of anthropologists speaking for others. This extends the ethical grounding of anthropology in a way that does not presume that the anthropologist is a white, Western individual (cf. Moore, 1997), and thus it de-essentializes the anthropological/informant dyad so as to permit a more detailed and nuanced understanding of how subject positions and identities are shaped within anthropological encounters – encounters understood as determinate forms of cultural and social practice.

One of the facts of anthropological practice and theory is that the grounding concept-metaphors of the discipline are also deployed in specific projects by those who are the subjects of anthropological enquiry. The result is that these concept-metaphors – the body, the self, gender, mind – are

never free of the uses to which they are put in various social contexts. In the chapter on gender in this volume, I discuss how anthropologists and feminists have subjected the notion of gender to critique and questioned its validity for understanding the projects and practices of others. My argument has certain continuities with that of Battaglia, in that I show how anthropology needs to deploy the concept-metaphor of gender to analyse continuities across space, time and experience, and yet simultaneously work against the integratory capacity of the concept to reveal alternative experiences and the pre-theoretical commitments that underpin the notion of gender in the social sciences.

Thomas Csordas reviews the history of the body in anthropological thought in his contribution to this volume, but does so from the perspective of the work that the concept-metaphor of the body has performed for anthropological theory over time. The present concern with theories of embodiment – which draw, among other things, on earlier theories of practice – demonstrates the way in which the concept-metaphor of the body has become bound up with issues of identity, subjectivity and agency in contemporary anthropological theorizing. The body is now understood in theoretical terms both as representation and as experience, and in this sense is a microcosm for the body of anthropological theory itself.

What this alerts us to is that concept-metaphors in anthropology are not foundational, but partial, and that their work is both to allow comparison and to open up spaces in which their meanings – in daily practice, in local discourses and in academic theorizing – can be interrogated (cf. Moore, 1997). What is clear is that however globalized and fragmented the contemporary world is or is said to be, individuals and collectivities still engage with it and live meaningful lives, they hack a sense of self and meaning out of disparate circumstances, and remain committed to various projects and relationships. There is a fundamental sense in which ous projects and relationships. There is a fundamental sense in which anthropology needs to remain aware of its historical determinations and the limitations of its own theoretical projects (Scott, 1992: 376–7). When we write of cultures being mobile and unbounded, or selves as contingent and multiply positioned, or communities as being dispersed and global, we need to be certain that we are not unintentionally cutting people off from their aspirations to the universal within their own particularities. Most people in the world – if we are speaking in absolute numbers – do still live in what they see as recognizable communities, believe themselves to be individuals, and think of their values and way of life as relatively coherent. They may not, of course, think this all the time or every day, but whatever the contingencies of life may be they remain in some relation to integratory concepts and practices that help to make life meaningful.

What it is to be human or what is it to be human?

It is held to be axiomatic in anthropology that humans make meaning out of life, indeed this is one of the features – if not the defining feature – of being human. To discuss the capacity for meaning creation – as I have in the previous paragraphs – as a determining characteristic of social agents around the world is, of course, to make a theoretical claim. This theoretical claim, however, does not operate on the same analytic level as standard generalizations based on ethnographic observations. It is certainly true that we can observe people everywhere making sense of their lives, and that one of the aims of anthropology should be to examine the way people conceive the world and reason upon it. Theories of agency, motivation and intention are all important here. But, a theoretical claim that people everywhere have the capacity to create meaning and that this is a defining feature of human agency is based on a pre-theoretical commitment. This pre-theoretical commitment is of a very particular kind in the sense that it is ontological rather than epistemological: in other words, it implies something about the nature of being human that is believed to be universally true. The problem for anthropology is that in spite of the impact of post-modern theorizing on the discipline and a political commitment to eschew homogenizing and exclusionary meta-theories, the discipline still has to engage with theories that are about the commonalities – and not just the differences – between all human beings. The impetus for this is not just the dialogue that must exist between socio-cultural anthropology, biological anthropology, psychology, linguistics and other cognate endeavours in recognition of the fact that humans have biological capacities and an evolutionary history, but also the political and humanist project of recognizing and valorizing the fact that humans everywhere are human. For this to be the case, there must be something shared about being human. This does not, of course, imply that those things that are shared are realized in the same way.

Contemporary socio-cultural anthropology has had a stormy relationship with the 'biological' in the form of socio-biology and evolutionary psychology. The general mistrust of universal theories has created something of a theoretical and political impasse, as well as a kind of misrecognition of the role of ontological theories in the discipline. It is evident from a review of recent work in anthropology that when we speak of or try to describe such processes as how humans acquire a body image or how symbolism works, or assert that the unconscious monitoring of human action is at the basis of human agency or that language brings humans into a relation with time, we are describing processes and making assertions that we imagine to be universally true, in that they apply to all

humans. The role of ontological presuppositions is the subject of the chapters by James Weiner and Pascal Boyer.

Boyer discusses cognitive theories and their relevance for anthropology. He argues that cultural representations are informed by tacit principles or intuitive ontologies that are common to all humans. These cognitive capacities are evolved properties of the mind – all humans have these capacities – but they do not directly determine the content of cultural representations. Cultural theories of the person, for example, vary widely and are local enrichments of intuitive ontologies. What Boyer reminds us of then is that theories can be composite – the theory that accounts for intuitive ontologies is not of the same order or kind as the theory that accounts for variation in the content of cultural representations – and that theories can have ontological and epistemological components. Indeed, certain kinds of questions, such as 'Do all humans think in the same way?', require theories that have universal and particular elements and pretensions. This is why it is not true to say that anthropology has done away with universal or 'grand theories' (cf. Moore, 1997). What it has done is to recognize the composite nature of theorizing.

Part of what is at issue here is the relationship between the individual and the social or the self and the symbolic. Boyer argues that intuitive ontologies are fragmented systems of domain-specific expectations, thus placing agency in context at the heart of anthropological theories of cognition. He also maintains that any individual mind entertains a huge number of mental representations, but only a few of these are shared in roughly similar forms among members of a group. In other words, only a few can be thought of as 'cultural'. The question of how we relate to the experiences and interpretations of others is one of the questions underpinning Weiner's chapter on anthropology and psychoanalysis. Here Weiner points out that as anthropologists we cannot ignore the issue of the subjective perception of the world or the fact that we develop a sense of self through engagement with others, with their experiences and interpretations.

What psychoanalytic anthropology stresses is the similarity in the symbolic capacity of humans, and the fact that agency is never a matter of voluntarism. In other words, any serious theory of human agency must take account of desire and of unconscious motivation. Psychoanalysis is a theory about what it is to be human and as such it is premised on a number of ontological presuppositions, the most famous of which is the existence of the unconscious. In any consideration of the relationship between psychoanalysis and anthropology, the question of universals always get raised: 'Is the Oedipus complex universal?', for example. However, what Weiner draws our attention to is that a psychoanalytic anthropology must needs be based on composite theories. Theories that are context dependent and

are related to a specific time and place, and theories that incorporate forms of ontological thinking. Weiner demonstrates this most directly in his discussion of the parallels between psychoanalysis's critique of the Western theory of the individual and Melanesian views of the acting person.

The relationship between the different elements in a composite theory is a complex and historically determined one. What contemporary anthropology and psychoanalysis share is a recognition that the self is not distinct from the relations into which it enters. From the anthropological point of view, this is not just true of 'other selves' – alternative understandings of self and person – but also of the anthropological self. The anthropologist as subject is encompassed within the same frame as the subjects of anthropological enquiry, is coeval with them, and is constituted through relations with them. This view of the framing of anthropological enquiry depends upon a much more nuanced recognition of locations, positionings and subjectivities than a previous view of anthropologist/informant relations as simply an interaction of autonomous selves, a relation of us and them separated by cultural difference.

Conclusion

The central traditional concepts of anthropology have changed in the face of globalization and changes in the forms of political economy, the nation-state, violence, the media and cultural identities. Diversity and difference have taken on new meanings in anthropology and the major controversies and debates can no longer be approached satisfactorily through traditional dualisms. However, contemporary questions are in some important ways reforged continuities of older questions, such as 'What is culture'; what is the relationship between social values and the material world, between structure and agency, between the individual and the symbolic; is anthropology a science or a moral project; and what is the role of the anthropologist? The major change in anthropological theorizing has come about through placing the anthropologist within the same frame of reference as the subjects of anthropology; through responding to the changing nature of anthropology inside and outside the academy; and through recognizing that anthropology is part of the world it studies.

Notes

1   Theories are, of course, types of generalization. However, much of the recent confusion about theory in anthropology could have been avoided by emphasizing the differences in scope and level of abstraction of various gener-

alizations. Generalizations, for the purposes of my point here, are relatively low in abstraction and scope and are derived from observations. Theories are higher in abstraction and scope and are induced from generalizations. Some anthropologists in the last decade or so, while wanting to critique meta-narratives and exclusionary theory, have been forced into the wholly unnecessary position of disavowing the validity of any generalizations and rejecting all forms of generalization as essentialist (Knauft, 1997: 283).

2   This new found optimism is in sharp contrast to the much-cited pessimism of some of anthropology's elder statesmen: Sahlins has characterized the discipline as being 'in the twilight of its career' (Sahlins, 1995: 14), while Geertz's more precise claim is that the discipline will disappear in about fifty years (Handler, 1991: 612).

3   I use the terms post-Marxist and post-structuralist here to mean theoretical positions and concepts that would not be possible in the discipline if previous Marxist and structuralist theories had not produced the theoretical critiques and detailed analyses that they did.

4   For discussions of the history of the introduction of these theories into anthropology, see Knauft, 1996 and 1997; Pool, 1991; Scott, 1992; Coombe, 1991.

5   Knowledge construction is necessarily linked to theories of the good life (see Taylor, 1991 and 1995). Knauft also asserts a necessary connection between ethics and theory in anthropology through his notion of 'critical humanist sensibilities' (Knauft, 1996).

6   Rather ironically, the existence of post-modernist or deconstructionist anthropologists is somewhat in doubt. There certainly were proponents of various related theoretical positions, camp followers and others who used the terms in their writings, but very few anthropologists have ever 'come out' and said that they are a post-modernist or deconstructionist anthropologist. Knauft (1997: 282) notes the limited present use of the term post-modernist in anthropology, except 'as an epithet against those charged with New Age navel-gazing'.

7   This is evident, apart from anything else, in the proliferation and development of sub-fields and topics in the last decades, as discussed above.

8   My use of 'our' in this context refers to the collectivity of anthropologists. This collectivity is inevitably imaginary, but it is not to be confused with the West or white or first world scholars; it refers to those people who share a disciplinary training and an engagement with anthropological discourses. Such an engagement or relation is obviously a contestatory one, and thus it is not assumed that all anthropologists share similar views or experiences.

9   Certain commentators might be moved to remark that anthropological theories do exist, in the sense of comparative kinship, for example. This is true in so far as anthropology courses in many universities continue to teach such theories and ethnographers continue to document kin ties and draw kinship diagrams, but the main point is that such theories no longer operate as the basic organizing principles of anthropological descriptions and explanations. Indeed, kinship still exists, people still live their kin relations, but kinship is no longer a grounding trope of anthropological enquiry.

10   I have developed this list from Knauft, 1997: 283–4.

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