

Foreword: Thinking Anthropologically, About British Social Anthropology

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History is unsentimental, tramping over a generation ... with ruthless determination.

(Zadie Smith, 2000: 238)

It may seem odd to begin the Foreword to this monumental new Handbook with the claim, made much of recently, that there is no longer anything distinctive about British social anthropology. Arguably, of course, the more critical issue is how distinguished are its accomplishments. *Distinction*, to be sure, denotes not just difference, as Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has reminded us; it also refers to the qualities embodied in that difference, a point to which we shall return. But the question remains. As Jonathan Spencer (2000: 1) puts it: Does British social anthropology remain distinctively *British*? Is it distinctively *social*? And is it distinctively *anthropology*? Some would answer all three in the negative. Thus, for example, Henrietta Moore (1999: 1) argued, over a decade ago, that there has been a retreat in the UK not just from the effort to write anything that looks particularly like anthropological theory, but, more fundamentally, 'from the project of anthropology itself' (see Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 157).

How the world has changed.

In the early 1970s, Adam Kuper (1973: 227) could still speak of British social anthropology as a quite specific 'intellectual tradition'.¹ Few would have disagreed; Foucauldians, Fanonists, Marxist and Postcolonial theorists might have preferred 'discipline' to 'tradition', given its alleged role in disciplining colonial knowledge of racially marked, 'primitive' others, but that is another matter. Not twenty years later, Kuper (1991: 307) would lament that it had become unclear 'what was "specifically British" about social anthropology in Britain' (Spencer 2000: 2). 'The Revolution' effected and named as such by its founding fathers (Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 54–55) – their way, this, of signifying what marked their discipline as different from the other modern European social sciences – appeared to have run its course (cf. Ingold 1996: ix; Kuklick 2008: 75). Its specificity had dissolved into indistinction. History had 'tramp[ed]' over its earlier generations, to evoke our epigraph from Zadie Smith, if not altogether unsentimentally then certainly ruthlessly. Anthropologists, it should be noted, have long had a tendency to do just this. Already in 1959, Edmund Leach (1961: 1f) had argued that the original 'unity of aim' of social anthropology – its commitment to the comparative, functionalist analysis of social structures – had led into a dead end: that, like butterfly collecting, it

yielded taxonomies, not useful theoretical generalizations. Even earlier, Evans-Pritchard (1950: 123), for whom the discipline was better regarded as ‘a kind of historiography, and therefore ultimately of philosophy or art’, saw a similar dead end in the ‘false scholasticism’ to which ‘The Revolution’ had aspired. Ours is an epistemic community with decidedly hypochondriacal proclivities (cf. Geertz 1988: 71).

The threat of indistinction of one kind or another, in short, has been a recurrent nightmare among British anthropologists, especially in recent times. At *fin de siècle*, for instance, Englund and Leach (2000: 238) offered a strident defence of the discipline against the growing number of its practitioners who had taken to trafficking with ‘metropolitan theorists’, thus to merge anthropology into cultural studies or sociology. For them, the ‘metanarrative of modernity’, in tandem with the deployment of ‘familiar sociological abstractions’, is robbing our practice of its uniqueness – which, they hold, lies in long-term, *in situ* ethnographic fieldwork. Their defence reads somewhat ironically against Anthony Giddens’ (1995: 274) dismal depiction of contemporary anthropology: that it is a field with an evaporating subject matter, with a method it shares with other social sciences, and with a deficient theoretical core. It is yet more ironic in light of G.P. Murdoch’s much-quoted assertion, made some sixty years ago from America: that, for all the ‘ethnographic competence and theoretical suggestiveness’ of their work (1951: 466–467) – which, with splendid iconoclasm, he then tore to shreds – British anthropologists could not be called anthropologists at all. Given their disinterest in culture, their exclusive focus on social groups and relations, their concern with synchrony over diachrony, and their pursuit of general laws of social structure and function, they were indistinguishable from sociologists (1951: 471).² The question of what British anthropology actually is in the present, patently, has a long past.

Nor is it only a question for British anthropology. Anthropology in the USA – afflicted since the 1980s with critiques of its textual practices, its foundational concept of culture, and its ethical *bona fides* – has also been hearing of late that it has become hard to separate from other disciplines and discourses. George Marcus (2008: 2), for one, claims that, despite its institutional strength, it is ‘in suspension’: that it has ‘no new ideas, and none on the horizon’. Its intellectual creativity and energy, he believes, nowadays comes less from its own interiors than from its interactions with feminist studies, media studies, postcolonial studies, science studies, and the like. Once upon a time, anthropologists feared, groundlessly as it turned out, that globalization might dissolve the particularity of other cultures into bland cultural sameness; it was a fear with roots deep in the ideological fabric of modernity itself. Now, by contrast, many hold that it is we, not our ‘natives’, who are undergoing erasure. And losing our *raison d’être*.

Such claims tend to spawn counter-claims. The idea that British social anthropology has lost its uniqueness, not surprisingly, has elicited several. *Pace* Englund and Leach, however, these do not depend on the transparent fantasy that it is intensive, localized fieldwork that defines us. There Giddens is correct: this method is no longer exclusively ours, although, in general, anthropologists cleave more than other social scientists to an ideal of ‘thick’, rather than ‘thin’, ethnographic description (Geertz 1973; but cf. J. L. Comaroff 2010: 526f). Ethnography, in other words, may be a *necessary* condition for anthropological distinctiveness – though there are some anthropologists in the USA who would now contest even this – but it is certainly not a *sufficient* one. The fact that it remains critical to our identity, or that most of us do it, is not, in itself, enough to secure our distinction, in either sense of the term. Which is why there have been efforts to look elsewhere. For Jonathan Spencer (2000), the answer lies neither in the means of producing knowledge characteristic of UK anthropologists, nor in the species of knowledge they produce. Instead, it resides in the fact that they constitute an identifiable epistemic *community*, one that shares discursive, pedagogic, and research practices (cf. Knorr

Cetina 1999). These practices are embodied in such things as a ‘seminar culture’, in which forms of tacit knowledge – and strong loyalties – are imparted (Spencer 2000: 17f). The singularity of British social anthropology, in other words, inheres primarily in its institutions, traditions, customs and social relations. This sounds very much like the sort of thing that an older generation of ethnographers took to be their analytic object: a small, culturally enclosed, self-reproducing ‘society’ of sorts. It is by these means, suggests Spencer, that the discipline defines and defends its boundaries, by these means that it sustains itself, and by these means that it determines what is or is not properly anthropology.³

Spencer is not alone in looking to institutional practices rather than intellectual content; recall Henrietta Moore’s observation to the effect that there has been a retreat in British anthropology from robust claims to write theory (above, p. xxviii). In like vein, John Gledhill (n.d.) notes that, nowadays, anthropologists in the UK are ‘as likely to be inspired by European social theorists’ as they are by other anthropologists. Nonetheless, he says, they have retained a high level of coherence as a relatively small, relatively marginal community in which – and here he goes further than Spencer – ‘it is still possible to discern a specifically “British” approach to research and argument.’⁴ While Gledhill does not go into detail on the substance of that approach, Richard Fardon, in his Introduction to this Handbook, points to a common ground less in grand theory – which has always been a subject of some ambivalence in the predominantly empiricist episteme of British anthropology – than in ‘theorized methodology’: a methodology, we take him to mean, that puts ethnography at the centre of its mode of production, but sees the knowledge it yields partly as a function of the questions that it is asked to address.

A different species of answer is proffered by Keith Hart (2008). Consonant with histories of the discipline that stress the degree to which it took on a unique shape in each of its major host countries (e.g. Barth et al. 2005; Mills 2008; Gingrich 2010a), Hart sees anthropology in the UK as a product of its specific structural and historical context (cf. Eriksen and Nielsen 2001: 56): in a ‘nationalist century’, its distinctiveness lay in the liberal vision it provided of a universe made up of bounded cultures and self-reproducing societies founded on ‘eternal principles’ of order. Its ‘primitive sociology’, rooted in the Central European culturalism of Malinowski and the structural functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown, argues Hart, afforded an ideological defence for the nation-states of a war-torn world against revolution. This, rather than its conventionally asserted role in the management of empire, he goes on to say, gave British anthropology, and its grounding in ethnography, its historical function: it buttressed a particular sort of national self-imaging. But the capitalist formation on which that imagining was founded has long been metamorphosing, rendering its mode of knowing anachronistic; hence, the anachronism of the idea of a distinctive *British* anthropology.

This take on the counter-revolutionary role of British anthropology is certainly provocative. So is the assertion that its ideological function at the metropole was of greater consequence than its deployment in colonial overrule; in respect of the latter, we prefer to see these two things, metropole and colony, as entailed in each other, and therefore as part of a single formation. Hart also leaves unspecified precisely how global transformations in these ‘murky times’ might be linked to shifts in the content and the structural location of anthropology in Britain today. But he is surely right to stress the historical contextualization of the discipline in structures of the long run. If we follow his logic into the Age of Now – in which the world at large is being recalibrated by changes in the proportional relationship of the market to society, by the reconstitution under neoliberal governance of nationhood, the state, and political life, by the erosion of ideological differences under the sign of the technical efficiency of capital, by the fetishism of culture as property – the question becomes this: Is there anything distinctive about the ways in which British anthropology is being drawn into the analysis of social forms

congealing across the planet in the here and now? In large measure, this Handbook seeks to be an answer to that question.

But we are running ahead of ourselves. In posing the problem as he does, Hart also prompts us to look again at the fertile mix of hubris and genius that underlay the founding ‘Revolution’ of British anthropology, specifically, its unique cult of knowledge production. That cult, as it turned out, was to prove less than revolutionary in its ideological implications. Yet it sustained for the discipline a potent marginality in the UK academy, a marginality upon which rested both its distinction and its distinctiveness. To the extent that its past continues to inform its practice in a radically realigned present, however spectrally, it remains pertinent to what may lie ahead for anthropology here. If, along with South African novelist J.M. Coetzee (2003: 38), we view the future as a ‘structure of hopes and expectations’, as a history actively to be made – even if not entirely as we please – then interrogating our genealogy becomes vital, not least for the ways in which anthropology might recast itself in times to come.

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The pioneering, even prophetic ethos of early twentieth-century British anthropology was quintessentially modernist in its vision of human life as social process, its common properties discoverable through systematic empirical observation. But it derived its unique brand of knowledge from the study of the underside of modernity: of primitive peoples who were conceived *both* as our natural forebears *and* as savage inversions of civilization. The paradox of similarity and difference inherent in this doubling was foundational to the discipline. Erected on the sensitive frontiers between Europe and its others, it took shape in the ready laboratories offered by the colonial world. From there, the first generation of professional ethnographers sent vividly documented accounts of timeless, homogeneous societies, isolated organisms preserved in the aspic of empire. Defined as *terra incognita*, these were places where European thought was held to have scant purchase, calling for a new sociology of the premodern world, one capable of plumbing the depths of *Homo sapiens* as social species.

Our common origin myth depicts this enterprise as the product of a joint becoming: Malinowski, the Romantic, it is said, invented fieldwork, making empirical observation into a process of sustained witnessing, a testimony to the ‘native’s point of view’; Radcliffe-Brown, by contrast, imposed order on raw ethnographic material, reworking Durkheim’s idea of the social fact into a more prosaic natural science of non-Western society, based on the comparative study of institutions. The primacy of the sociological, as we have noted, was to remain a distinctive feature of the British school, making culture and meaning into second-order representations of social arrangements, albeit often in complex figurations. But the ideology of empiricism has always been something of a subterfuge. Theory never springs directly from facts, of course, which is why, at their most creative, anthropologists have always flouted their own ‘scientific’ prescriptions. To be sure, generations of them would argue over how to arrive at generalizations from an unruly melange of idiosyncratic accounts, a commitment to induction that, according to Kuper (1983: 205), would eventually condemn anthropology in the UK to theoretical decline and ethnographic particularism. But the counterpoint of the particular and the general, of data and analysis, has always been more complex, more elusive. It has always been a matter of what Peirce (1958: 136) termed ‘abduction’ and Edmund Leach (1961: 5) called ‘inspired guesswork’.

A strikingly eclectic array of ideas, large and small, was put into play as the discipline invented itself, facilitated by the possibilities offered to the sociological imagination by a model of discrete, small-scale societies, societies susceptible to bold, holistic analyses of their internal workings. At the same time, those ‘savage’ societies were also Europe’s camera

obscura, living manifestations of its dreams and nightmares. The most provocative insights generated within British anthropology over the years have, arguably, stemmed as much from preoccupations in the Western world as from facts on exotic ground. Whether it be Malinowski's vision of the rationality of primitive economics or of the cultural specificity of the Oedipus complex, Evans-Pritchard's accounts of witchcraft as a practical philosophy or of the possibility of social order *sans* government, Turner on the liberating effects of *communitas*, Gluckman on catharsis, or Douglas on dirt as matter out of place, the fertile redeployment of metropolitan theory by estranging familiar phenomena has a long history in our discipline.

The aura of theoretical experimentation was especially evident in the formative years of British anthropology. Take Radcliffe-Brown's preface to *African Political Systems*, an influential text intended to demonstrate the accomplishments of a maturing British structural functionalism. The piece began with a predictable paean to the study of comparative institutions, to its capacity for offering up general sociological laws. But how, it asked, are particular types of institutions – like those that comprise 'political organization' – to be identified and isolated from the total systems of which they are part (1940: xii)? Almost immediately, it segues into a reflection on the nature of abstraction in social analysis, coupled with a trenchant critique of brute positivism. Without 'new and fruitful ideas ... method in itself gives birth to nothing' (1940: xiii), wrote Radcliffe-Brown. Yet, in giving account of 'simpler societies', the theories of political philosophers or economists are insufficient, too parochial. It was incumbent on anthropology, therefore, to 'make [its] own' more comprehensive concepts. He attacked the task with gusto, pondering, like a Carl Schmitt for the antipodes, what might be the distinctive features of political, as against other, forms of organization; a quite different spirit, this, from one that would limit itself to what may be induced purely from empirical facts. In the end, Radcliffe-Brown's definition of politics – to paraphrase, the maintenance of social order, within a territorial framework, by means of the organized use or threat of physical force – was a banal echo of European ideology. But we encounter some strikingly prescient insights along the way. Like the claim that 'the state', spoken of in terms of 'sovereignty' or the power to exercise will, was a 'fiction of the philosophers', that what *does* exist 'in the phenomenal world' is a complex organization of relations and roles concerned with maintaining the balance of law and war (1940: xxiii).

The anthropological imagination at work here was an uneasy amalgam of critical estrangement and ethnocentrism, a consequence, perhaps, of the will to translate the worlds of living premoderns into the language of intellectual elites in late imperial Britain. In that light, the challenge was to show how, in the absence of complex regulating mechanisms, these 'simple', self-reproducing societies could wrest order, stability, and continuity out of anarchy. The conventional answer, which took its lead from Radcliffe-Brown, lay at once in their interlocking structures of functionally homeostatic institutions, in the tempering of human nature through rules of kinship, and in the cultivation of moral subjects by means of customary law and the imperatives of religious practice. True, following Hart (2008), this Arcadian model could be read as an exotic endorsement of liberal ideals of nationhood, *sans* class conflict and struggle. But it could as well be seen as a critique of Enlightenment universalisms and the regime of knowledge of which they were part.

The story is also more complicated insofar as the model of self-regulating social systems had more than one variant, arising out of the fact that its stress on norms, order, and regulation existed in tension with the view, associated with Malinowski, that strategic, utilitarian, rule-bending action was characteristic of even the most 'savage' of peoples. For the likes of Max Gluckman and Victor Turner of the Manchester School, strife, self-interest, and structural tension were as endemic to premodern as they were to modern societies. However – and here

the Mancunians drew on a theoretical repertoire that included both Simmel and Marx – whereas capitalist societies were built on inherent contradictions, precapitalist ones were founded on conflict. The former were ‘historical’, being caught up in a linear movement through time and liable to change, even to undergo revolution. The latter were ‘ahistorical’, being characterized by cyclical processes, equilibrium, repetitive reproduction, and, where they occurred, rebellions that left the structure of things in place, even as they altered relations of power and authority among living persons. If this was a boldly theorized vision of the precapitalist world, a broadly similar, similarly bold, move was made by Edmund Leach (1954). Leach deployed the work of Pareto to reduce the disorderly, conflict-laden history of Highland Burma to a model of oscillating equilibrium, one that sought to make sense of processes of the long run by showing that they moved between two models of social organization – one highly hierarchized and state-like, the other egalitarian and decentralized.

Of course, neither of these efforts to fuse a Malinowskian attention to conflict with a Radcliffe-Brownian concern for social order dealt with historical facts beyond the bounded, homeostatic worlds with which they were concerned. Again, perhaps the first, most comprehensive effort to do so would come from the Manchester School in Central Africa, where the destabilizing effects of empire could not easily be ignored. Under the influence first of Godfrey Wilson, then of Max Gluckman, the Mancunians enlarged their ethnographic compass to take in the interpolation of ‘tribal societies’ into the colonial political economy. Gluckman attacked Malinowski’s effort to explain social change here through the prism of ‘culture contact’, insisting that Africans, perforce, participated with Europeans in a ‘single social system’ (Ferguson 1999:26). In the upshot, the Manchester School found itself drawn into studies of the impact on rural communities of processes of proletarianization, labour migration, underdevelopment, urbanization, and new configurations of class and identity. But, being committed to an equilibrium model of indigenous social systems, and sustaining a view of those systems as self-reproducing, they could not, in the end, develop a theoretically principled historical anthropology of colonialism, let alone empire, a shortcoming for which anthropology at large has long been taken to task by critical theorists. Nonetheless, as all this suggests, post-Second World War British anthropology found itself having to address large problems and large matters of theory from the vantage of what had become known as the Third World. And, as it did, so the discipline in the UK became a fertile community of argument, one with salience for the academy at large.

That community of argument flourished in the 1950s, all the more so as processes of decolonization gained momentum, irrevocably altering the imperial terrain on which British anthropologists had long worked. It was also fuelled by their intellectual exchanges with the other social sciences and other national anthropologies. Thus, for example, just as Evans-Pritchard had insisted that the discipline should shake off its positivist heritage and define itself as ‘a kind of ... philosophy or art’ (above, p. xxv), so some of his colleagues became preoccupied with what, in Britain, remained the relatively neglected study of meaning and symbol, prompting a reengagement with French writings on structure and classification, among them, the classic works of Mauss, Hertz, and, later, the linguistically-inspired structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. ‘Neo-structuralism’ in the UK sought to reconcile models of the universal logic of human thought with a properly British concern for ideas as the reflex, and reflection, of social relations. For its critics, this was an indigestible reduction of philosophical formalism to flat-footed empiricism. Patently, it did little to shift the abiding fixation on ethnographic particularism. But, yet again, it yielded insights of bold significance – the influential writings of Victor Turner on ritual, Mary Douglas on cosmology and classification, and Edmund Leach on myth and verbal categories – and sparked productive debate about the place of the unconscious in social analysis.



And then, quite suddenly, in the late 1960s and early 1970s – when Great Britain and much of the world was in creative ferment – this imaginative effervescence, this theoretical ambition, ran out of steam. As we ourselves prepared, at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in 1968, to do traditional fieldwork in rural South Africa, the streets around us were alive with protest against the Vietnam War, apartheid, and the cultural establishment. A decidedly postcolonial spirit, emanating from the ‘new nations,’ was beginning to assert itself. We were entering what Adam Kuper (1983: 185–189) would dub ‘the lean years’, a time of parochialism and ‘discounted’ theoretical debate.

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And so, back to the present Andre Gingrich (2010b: 552) has noted, for the discipline at large, that ‘the era of national traditions is coming to a close’. This is hardly surprising at the dawn of what appears to be a post-national age; not an age, we stress, in which nationhood is likely to disappear, but one in which it is re-situated in a global topography of economic, political, legal, demographic, digital, cultural, and religious scapes, of articulations and disarticulations, ruptures and flows. In sum, just as the modernist nation-state is now saturated with awkward cacophonies of cultural difference, has forfeited a large measure of its sovereignty, and finds its borders ever more porous to the movement of capital, commodities, images, and persons, so national anthropologies have seen their substantive identities thoroughly compromised. To parse the matter once more into Jonathan Spencer’s three-part question, now in the indicative voice. To the degree, first, that its frontiers have been breached, anthropology in the UK is unlikely ever to be uniquely *British* again (cf. Barth 2005: 56). Second, to the degree that the existence of society itself is everywhere under scrutiny in the neoliberal age, the discipline here is no longer exclusively *social* in its horizons; in 1989, interestingly, the *Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory* in the UK met to discuss the proposition that ‘The Concept of Society is Theoretically Obsolete’ (Ingold 1996: 55–98). And third, to the degree that *anthropology* is faced everywhere with doubts about its *raison d’être* – recall both Giddens and Marcus – its role in the production of knowledge is increasingly hard to distinguish from those of, among other things, cultural studies, science and technology studies, feminist studies, history, linguistics, and philosophy. Mark, in that regard, that Part 1 of this Handbook deals at length with the interdisciplinarity of our subject. Which is why, to the degree that it retains an identity at all, that identity lies – as Spencer, Gledhill, and others have said – in a community of practice that knows itself as a community but is struggling to define the precise content of its practice. This is also why it has become so difficult to characterize British anthropology in the present tense. Its present, to be sure, *is* somewhat tense. And therein lies an important set of clues.

The fact that British social anthropology is post-national does not mean that it is post-historical. Hence the questions we posed above:

- To what *is* it responding, in the history of the present, if not to the imperatives of nation or empire?
- What are the structural conditions, to return us to J.M. Coetzee’s literary aphorism, to which its hopes and expectations are attuned?
- And *how* has it reacted to those conditions?

Fredrik Barth (2005: 56) notes that the predicament of anthropology in the UK has to be read in the context of an ‘epoch of marked decline in the British universities ... caused by shrinking economies and stifling regimes of bureaucratic regulation.’ While the discipline has



sustained a steady research profile under straitened conditions, and goes about its business quite effectively, it has, he suggests, suffered a ‘loss of self-assurance [and] self-sufficiency’, not to mention an outflow of scholars to the USA. The decline began in the Thatcher years, during which the restructuring of institutions produced a relentless culture of audit, evaluation, and standardization, of funding squeezes, creeping privatization, and unvarnished economism; E.P. Thompson’s (1980) nightmare of ‘the business university’ *circa* 1970, it seems, would mature into a full-blown reality. What is more, adds Gledhill (n.d.), anthropologists, starved of financial support, have also had to deal with ethical encroachments. Of these, the most stark has been the pressure exerted by funding agencies, more or less directly, to do research – on topics like crime, immigration, terrorism, poverty – that might be deployed against vulnerable populations, that serves the interests of government, or that appeal to the private sector. Nor is this merely an ethical issue. It is also ‘intellectually deadly’ (Gusterson 2011: 2). Gusterson points out, perspicaciously, that, under prevailing institutional conditions, few of the great works of modern social anthropology – those of the likes of Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Leach, or Douglas – are likely to have been possible, being of no demonstrable value to the corporate world or to contemporary UK educational policies, which, notes Richard Fardon (2011: 2), are currently being directed toward science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine, with potentially disastrous effects for the ‘smaller disciplines.’ The result? ‘Neo-liberalized students ... over-regulated universities ... the worst of times.’

As this implies, the changing institutional ecology in which British anthropology finds itself is part and parcel of a broader process: the neoliberalization of the political economy of knowledge. We refer here primarily to its epistemic, not its pragmatic, effects, to what present themselves as suitable objects for study, suitable concepts with which to study them, the *Weltbild*, the world-picture, into which our research interpolates itself.

Neoliberalization – itself a rather crude, under-specified gloss for the contemporary moment in the history of capital, *tout court* – has effected major transformations in the lineaments of economy and society, of politics and culture, and, as we have said, of the nation-state. These transformations have occasioned shifts in the ways in which the social sciences perceive, problematize, and portray the world. Summarily stated, there is a strong tendency in the neoliberal *Weltanschauung* to de-historicize history in favour of presentist contingency, to turn away from most forms of theory work, and to prefer, in producing knowledge, to cleave to the safe shores of empirical accounting – phrased, however tacitly, in one or another form of methodological individualism that ‘explains’ phenomena by arranging them into ensembles of events, actors, and actions, all alike motivated by the material and affective utilities of a hyper-rational *Homo economicus*; precisely the thing, that is, *against* which Durkheim wrote his sociology to begin with. This, in part, is why we, in the social sciences, find ourselves debating the utility of our *ur*-concepts, noun-concepts like society or culture, finding it easier to speak in adjectives (the social, the cultural). In this *Weltanschauung*, which avoids discursive abstraction even as it renders human life ever more abstract, it is unacceptable to account for quotidian ‘facts’ with reference to invisible forces or larger determinations, *de rigueur* to treat the surfaces of the observable universe as the outer limit of our analytic horizons, and necessary, in an increasingly anti-intellectual climate, to compromise on complexity in order to be heard at all.

Put the two things together – the prevailing institutional ecology and the neoliberalization of the political economy of knowledge – and the terrain of contemporary British anthropology becomes more legible. For one thing, its research foci have been affected, evincing a strong turn toward the pragmatics of applied anthropology, the anthropology of development, and the anthropology of public policy (Barth 2005: 56–57; Gledhill n.d.). There has also been a growing concern with topics related to the sciences, like conservation ecology, the environment, ethnobotany, behavioural genetics, human–animal relations, human evolution, new

technologies, historical demography, cognition, and medicine; also with topics of broad popular interest, such as new media, aesthetics, civil society, tourism, trauma and conflict, work and unemployment (Kuklick 2008: 76–77). At first glance, this would appear simply as a cynical move to make the discipline more marketable, to make it more appealing to an imagined community of consumers, and to make its brand more sustainable. But many anthropologists have been attracted to these sorts of issues for their intrinsic interest and importance. Moreover, a good deal of conventional ethnographic research continues despite this – or perhaps because of it – to be published in British journals; ‘some influential schools of contemporary anthropology,’ says Adam Kuper (2005: 60), have preferred to ‘[turn] in on themselves, insisting that true anthropology concerns itself with the symbolic behaviour of faraway peoples.’

But it is not merely by feeling the need to overhaul their subject matter, to address topics of current concern, or to reach out to various publics that British anthropologists have been imbricated in the neoliberal moment. A fair number have been drawn by the critical challenges posed by the effects of that moment, some of them deeply troubling, to broaden their conceptual horizons in order to explore the impact of translocal economic, political, and cultural forces on the lifeworlds of both the global south and, if to a lesser extent, the global north; hence, for example, recent efforts to interrogate the diverse faces of cosmopolitanism,⁵ thus to make anthropology itself more, well, cosmopolitan. By and large, though, the disciplinary response in the UK to the provocations posed by the history of the present has been to write exquisitely detailed accounts of the coming to ground of planetary processes in different exotic locales: in the more-or-less bounded, intimate lifeworlds that have always been our first object of study, worlds putatively accessible only to ethnography as a hands-on craft. This enterprise often bespeaks an investment in documenting how ‘little peoples’ retain their integrity in the face of the homogenizing effects of globalization; even more, how, heroically, they keep at bay those effects, even turn them to their own ends. Of course, few locales can plausibly be held these days to escape the reach of the Empire of Capital; the founding fiction of a non-capitalist universe of self-reproducing societies – productive as it once was for the theory-work of a rising anthropology – has long been unsustainable. Arguably, however, the implicit refusal to address the historical entailment of those peoples in the global order, or to analyse the larger forces that are reshaping their micro-environments, is itself an effect of the *Weltanshauung* of neoliberalism – which has a tendency to hide its own inner workings, thereby to render invisible the ways in which they play themselves out in dispersed places on dispersed peoples. In so doing, they reinforce the illusion of the relative autonomy, integrity, and self-determination of those peoples, many of whom seem at least as anxious to claim connection to the global order as disconnection from it.

But the most fundamental effects of the neoliberal moment on British anthropology, perhaps, are those of which we spoke earlier: the resort to an episteme that tends to de-historicize history; that, in stressing the contingent and the continuous present over the systemic and processes of the long run, confines its descriptive analyses largely to the surface planes of social, cultural, and material life; that, in taming risk, puts much of its faith in the respectable facticity of empiricism; that is sceptical of the value, or even the possibility, of theory, preferring, when necessary, to import it, ready-made, from outside, from such established scholarly sources as British or French sociology. In speaking of this last, of theory-scepticism, Adam Kuper (1983: 202–204) argues that anthropologists in the UK have always tended to opt for the inductive over the deductive, choosing to have ‘little to do with grand theory’ that is unverifiable by ‘observational techniques’; this species of theory, for him, amounts little more than a ‘theological world-view’. Kuper may be stretching a point in respect of the past. It is hardly as if the classic work of earlier generations of anthropologists – from Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown through Evans-Pritchard to Gluckman and Leach – were not grand,



deductive, or ‘theological’ in this sense. But his observation *does* seem to apply in the present. No wonder he (2005: 60) holds that, in the final analysis, contemporary British anthropology takes ‘its own distinctive DNA’ to lie above all in its methodology, in its commitment to ‘thick’ ethnography; this in spite of the fact that, as Fardon notes below, there has always been a discrepancy of scale between our sites of fieldwork and our fields of inquiry, a discrepancy never larger than it is at present. Still, in the neoliberal *Weltanschauung*, method, the technical means by which specific ends are accomplished, is given a great deal of weight – and not only in anthropology.

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The distinctive approach of British anthropology, Keith Hart (2008) contends, ‘so brilliantly adapted to conditions in the mid-twentieth century’ – to the high era of nationalism, liberalism, and state capitalism – ‘may not serve us well in the next’. One might argue that the British anthropology of the early twenty-first century, as we have sketched it, has *already* adapted, quite expeditiously, to its historical times, to a ‘post-ideological’ age in which global capitalism has outgrown the nation-state, in which society and polity elude easy conceptual grasp, in which cultural identities trump other forms of difference and belonging, and in which the market appears to drive more or less everything. Has a liberal anthropology given way seamlessly to a neoliberal one?

This, in turn, raises a yet more fundamental question: Should British anthropology continue to exist as a distinct, empirically oriented, inductive discipline that focuses – in a mobile universe, a universe of inordinately complicated, labile webs of transactions, relations, mediations, and flows – on social phenomena of small, observable scale? Also, Ought we to persist in leaving theory-work to the prophets and the philosophers and a few select sociologists?

There are good reasons to believe that this would *not* serve British anthropology well. They turn, once again, on the double sense of disciplinary distinction: on what remains *distinctive* about our analytical perspective and on what of its accomplishments *distinguish* themselves in the contemporary political economy of knowledge production. Both are anticipated in what we have already said. Many of the Big Questions in the Age of Now that strike anthropologists as compelling are shared by other disciplines as well. But ours brings a particular perspective to them. Above all, it has, in the past, been more ready than its sibling social sciences to estrange taken-for-granted terms, concepts, and phenomena, asking what they actually *mean*, wherein lies their phenomenal reality, how they came to be constructed and construed as they have been. Take democracy and development, two common tropes of our times, both of them elements in the globalization of neoliberal governmentality. Political scientists, sociologists, and economists have explored the impact of each, focusing on the conditions under which they ‘take off’ or ‘fail’ and the like. By contrast, anthropology, at its best, begins by interrogating their ontological status as social facts in the world. It asks what these phenomena actually signify to everyone caught up in the processes that occur under their name, what sorts of practices, ideas, schemes, and values they congeal and/or conceal — and how, as we said earlier, they come to ground in different locales, thus to construct lived realities that appear at once similar and yet different across global space and time. In posing these foundational questions from its particular vantage, the discipline situates itself well to speak back critically to Euro-modern social theory, its normative ideals, and its conceits.

To the degree that anthropology has no option any more but to address the effects of social processes of large scale and longer runs, it is likely always to do so by interrogating them ‘from below’. In this regard, as we have intimated, the discipline has long been at the vanguard in analysing how those processes imbricate themselves in, and inflect, the lives of sentient



subjects in dispersed places. And how they are apprehended, configured, and deployed, from within vernacular moral and material economies, in terms that are never entirely predictable. In so far as we meet the challenge of plumbing the ways and means by which abstract historical forces take on concrete form in different contexts, anthropologists are especially well placed to show how people 'make history and society', space and place, where they succeed in imposing their agency upon the world, and where their efforts to do so are structurally constrained or curtailed; although this last requires that we forsake the naive romance of native resistance to globalization (see above) for a dialectical take on the history of the present. To be sure, ethnographers ought to be able to read, in the encounter between the local and the worlds beyond it – there are, after all, many scales of relevance *between* the local and the global – what the proportionate effects are of each on the others. And, by extension, make clear how the ideological imperatives of the moment, be it 'development' or 'democratization' or anything else, may be more or less waylaid by what they confront on the ground; how they may be critically reformulated, both as explanations of past events and as prescriptions for times to come; how, in the upshot, the future is unlikely to consist in a long teleological march toward the End of History. But, to reiterate, if any of this it to be done by we anthropologists, we cannot stand back from taking seriously the interrogation of the larger determinations so evidently at play in and on the social ecologies in which we work, either methodologically or theoretically.

Methodologically speaking, the way has been prepared by developments in the discipline in recent years. Echoing the earlier innovations of the Manchester school, scholars of translocal phenomena have devised new techniques – multi-sited ethnographies, ethnographies of different dimensions, and ethnographies of peripatetic persons, objects, and signs, for instance, not to mention ethnographies that triangulate the field, the text, and the archive – to lay bare social worlds at once situated and mobile, at once fixed and in flow, at once concrete and immanent. Elsewhere, we have spoken of this as 'ethnography on an awkward scale' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003): ethnography, that is, directed not just at describing contingent events and actions, everyday life and the social personae involved in it, local communities and their signifying practices, but ethnography, predicated on a counterpoint of the deductive and the inductive, designed to capture the processes by which space and time, place and population, distribution and flow congeal into larger social phenomena, taking shape as virtual vectors made visible, just like iron filings on large magnetic fields. The directionality and logic of these processes, like magnetized iron filings, can never be taken, a priori, to be random. Quite the opposite. Ethnography as method demands that we seek out the relationship between the contingent and the constellation, and the incidental and the incidence – all the better to account for hidden determinations and to grasp how they may be made manifest in any locale, whether it be in the concentrations of power and domination, the vectors of vulnerability, or the zones of autonomy that compose the topography of ordinary life.

Theoretically speaking, the message is clear. Retreat into inductive particularity is insufficient, at once epistemically and ethically. If we are to grasp what it is that constructs and configures the lifeworlds that we study, if we are to make sense of the often troubling social facts that we discern within them, it is necessary to connect the dots, so to speak: to disinter, render visible, and account *conceptually* for, those larger processes and phenomena, those forces and determinations – and for the manner in which they affect, and are affected by, their encounter with the practices, purposes, moralities, and materialities of different peoples and places. Here, it would serve us well to recover something of the hubris of an earlier anthropological age, to operate with the presumption, unless and until proven otherwise, that it is both possible and necessary to establish systemic relations among the minutiae of the phenomenal world, holistically conceived – and to indulge in inspired guesswork in seeking out, indeed explaining, the

connections among them. The content of those classic theories is no longer of salience to us, of course; the limits of their analytic assumptions, for all their heuristic value, ensured their failure. Nor ought we to sustain the *faux* independence that our disciplinary forefathers claimed from the other human sciences – from which they borrowed liberally anyway. But what we can take from them is a willingness to refashion existing theory, thus to estrange the worlds that we study. And to take peripheral facts and recast them into forms of knowledge of very general salience to the academy at large. If that is theory as theology, it has the advantage at least of rendering anthropology a potentially revelatory critical project.

To be sure, social anthropology, with its continuing history of unassailable accomplishment, *does* remain uniquely capable of sustaining itself as just such a critical project. The bolder, we believe, the better. After all, we should surely be wary of ceding the large, complex theoretical questions of our day to the ready reductionism of market rationality, popular scientism, psychologism, emotionalism, or biogenetic determinism., Or, for that matter, to various sorts of postmodern nihilism, or even to philosophy or ... theology. In confronting the issues that concern us now, we would do well to recall the enduring relevance of a rich modern heritage: of Durkheim's critique of methodological individualism, Mauss's gift of the 'total social fact', Weber's grasp of the complexities of *Verstehen*, of intersubjective meaning, and of Marx's commitment to denaturalizing surface realities in order to reveal the deep interplay of social, material, and moral forces that give them life. There could hardly be more challenging times, in sum, in which to commit ourselves again to the counter-hegemonic inquiry that has always characterized our endeavour at its most vibrant: to renew, that is, a critical social anthropology that is at once distinctive *and* distinguished.

NOTES

1 The tendency to refer to British anthropology as a 'tradition' is not uncommon; see e.g. Kuklick (2008) and Gledhill (n.d.).

2 Murdoch's point was underscored by Ernest Gellner (1970: 22f), who, from within the British social sciences, pointed out that there was no difference between the ways in which anthropologists and sociologists deployed their key concepts.

3 Spencer (2000: 20) is less sure of the future. Current conditions, he says, are making it difficult to sustain this community of practice; they could lead to the 'end of British social anthropology as we have known it.'

4 Cf. also Kuklick (2008: 77). 'British anthropology,' she says, 'has distinctive features, if only because it is practiced within distinctive institutional structures.'

5 In 2006, the Association of Social Anthropologists convened a conference on *Cosmopolitanism and Anthropology*, see <http://www.nomadit.net/asatest/conferences/asa06/theme.htm>, accessed 22 February 2011, some of the papers from which were published in Werbner (2007).

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