



Review Essay

A World of Anthropologies: Paradigms and Challenges for the Coming Century

Ribeiro, Gustavo Lins, and Arturo Escobar, eds. (2006) *World Anthropologies: Disciplinary Transformations within Systems of Power*. Oxford and New York: Berg Publisher. 341 pages. ISBN 13978-184520-1906

Van Bremen, Jan, Eyal Ben-Ari, and Syed Farid Alatas, eds. (2005) *Asian Anthropology*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon. 249 pages. ISBN 04153498341

Yamashita, Shinji, Joseph Bosco, and J.S. Eades, eds. (2004) *The Making of Anthropology in East and Southeast Asia*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. 374 pages. ISBN 1571812598

In the classic ethnographic film, *A Man without Pigs*, detailing Papuan anthropologist John Waiko's intricate negotiations of fieldwork and kinship, there is a moment in which he gives red soil and a small pig as gifts to clan members assisting in preparations for a feast celebrating the completion of his doctoral dissertation. It is one of many instances in which Waiko must negotiate the near impossible complexity and often competing objectives of the Binandere community in order to advance a communal project. As he says to his relatives from across the river: "This little pig is so you will get on with the job." In three recent volumes, more than three dozen authors make a series of similarly small yet enriching contributions to the anthropological community. Taken together, these books provide an important benchmark for the evolution of the discipline of anthropology into the twenty-first century.

Whether we believe that knowledge is cumulative in a modern scientific sense, proceeds through paradigm shifts (as Kuhn argued), or transforms through discursive ruptures (as Foucault suggested), anthropology in the first decade of the 21st century is not what it was in the mid-20th century, late-19th century or before. Indeed, among the most important but perhaps underappreciated transformations of anthropology in the past century as been the expanded global diversity of the subject as an academic discipline. *World Anthropologies*, *Asian Anthropology* and *The Making of Anthropology in East and Southeast Asia* (hereafter *The Making of Anthropology*) offer a major contribution to the discipline of anthropology and social science more generally by providing a global English-language readership access to some of the rich diversity of anthropological traditions outside of the better known and (as the volumes all argue) hegemonic American and European traditions.

The three collections aim to redress the lack of knowledge among the broader anthropological community regarding the wide variety and increasingly well established anthropological traditions on the periphery of the world system of academia. Taken together, these pieces provide a broad account of late twentieth century anthropological traditions situated across more than fifteen countries. The chapters of *World Anthropologies*, which has the broadest geographic coverage, incline toward country-by-country reports of national anthropological traditions, while the contributions to *Asian Anthropology* tend to grapple with conceptual issues as much as or more than national disciplinary histories. Essays in *The Making of Anthropology* fall somewhere in between, with a remarkably heavy focus on Japan. However, this broad characterization is somewhat misleading as each volume contains a wide and valuable range of both conceptual arguments and national disciplinary histories. All three volumes are an important account of the state of anthropology from perspectives outside of North America.

I will not attempt to recount the entire rich contents of the works here, but rather reflect on the broader issues they raise. The three books provide important insights into the challenges facing the future development of anthropology. In some cases, the challenges are clearly and explicitly addressed, but other, perhaps even more important ones, remain somewhat implicit.

Anthropological Hegemony and World Systems

The most obvious challenge is the political economy of the production and distribution of anthropological knowledge. All three volumes address the “world system” of academic anthropology (see especially Kuwayama in *Making of Anthropology*; Ben-Ari and van Bremen, Eades, and Kuwayama in *Asian Anthropology*; Ribeiro and Escobar in *World Anthropologies*). Anthropology, in its broadest sense as the study of human beings, has almost certainly been around in one form or another since *homo sapiens* (or perhaps even our ancestors) became capable of organized reflective thought. But the anthropology we are concerned with here is the progeny of the academic discipline with roots in the modern university of the past few centuries. These centuries witnessed a world system of geopolitics dominated first by Europe and more recently by North America.

The political and economic power of those regions was paralleled by the development of a largely American and European hegemony in social thought and social theory. The rest of the world was not a mere mute bystander in this system. But American and European institutions have played a dominant role in formulating and disseminating conceptual models for understanding human beings — embedded in major (as well as minor) ideas such as society, culture, nation, race, and so on. Much of this process of formulation and dissemination took place well outside of the domain of anthropology as a discipline and of academia in general. Yet disciplinary anthropology of the 19th and 20th centuries was one important organ of what S.F. Alatas and others have described as the “social science superpowers,” of the United States, Britain, France and to a lesser degree other European nations (e.g. Alatas 2006).

Several chapters scattered throughout the three volumes provide detailed accounts of the hegemonic influence of American and European anthropologies (e.g. Kim in *The Making of Anthropology*; Prager in *Asian Anthropology*). But in more instances, Western academic

hegemony is asserted rather than demonstrated. This is not to argue therefore that Western intellectual thought has not played a role in shaping various national traditions; rather that one would like to see finer grained demonstrations or examples of this rather abstract notion of “hegemonic” anthropologies. While critiques of anthropology (especially colonial anthropology) are now abundant, there is still work to be done in teasing out the history of ideas within diverse traditions in various places (e.g. Goh 2007). More important than the historical archeology or history of ideas of American and European influence are the contributions made in these volumes to the reconfiguration of anthropology taking place in these other anthropological traditions. This reconfiguration raises critical challenges for the production of anthropological knowledge.

Reconfiguring the Anthropological Self

When does reflexivity become myopia and navel-gazing? When do critiques of power dynamics, othering and orientalism devolve into the denial of the possibility of intersubjective dialog? Unfortunately specific critiques — such as those developed by Said (1979) or Asad (1973) — are too often and too easily spun out of any context into generalized criticisms, which rather than functioning as deconstruction of received wisdom in ways that add to our knowledge become instead reactionary nativism. This stifles, rather than fosters, intersubjectivity and ironically reasserts the very boundaries of difference (ethnic, national, and otherwise) that much critical anthropology has sought to question.

For the most part, the contributors to these three volumes are keenly aware of this dilemma and many chapters in each of the volumes addresses it head-on (e.g. Sinha in *Asian Anthropology*). It is usually framed in terms of the dilemma or pros and cons of comparing the position of “native” to “foreign” anthropologists. Perhaps what is needed is a more fine-grained consideration of positionality. The editors of *The Making of Anthropology* (Yamashita, et al.) provide a sketch of different insider/outsider positions, based on the ethno-national relationship between the fieldworker (author), informants and audiences. While heuristically instructive, it also reasserts simplified national selves and others. Could we imagine such a matrix that encompassed the radical multidimensionality of lived human subjectivity — of sameness and difference embedded not only in notions of nationality or ethnicity (itself problematic and contested in almost all cases), but also gender, age, sexuality, religion, political orientation, socioeconomic status, geographic origins (such as rural and urban), and so on *ad infinitum*?

The powerful influence of the culturally configured position of any social researcher is now widely recognized. As Michael Herzfeld has argued (see Herzfeld, *forthcoming*), the primary instrument that any anthropological fieldworker uses to investigate the social world is that researcher’s own self (especially in the tradition of ethnographic, participant observation and interviewing). Just as various instruments in other fields of investigation yield different insights into a given phenomenon, different fieldworkers, who come to a field site with diverse conceptual and perceptual tools *and* who are perceived differently by the people they work with, are bound to provide different perspectives on the social worlds about which they write. From this point of view, “native” anthropology, however construed, does not provide a purer vision of a particular society than that of “foreign” anthropology. Rather, our anthropological knowledge of the world is impoverished when professional

anthropologists are selected from only a small and relatively homogenous segment of the world's population (e.g. Europe and North America).

Even as ever more important works are being produced by indigenous anthropologists (i.e. scholars trained in anthropology studying their own societies), indigeneity itself has become an increasingly questionable and contested position. The problem, I would suggest, is that we continue to operate with relatively crude, reified concepts of “self” and “other”. Every one of us is the product of a unique history of individual experiences and learning. Assertions of ethnic, national, or for that matter gender, class or other identity-group claims are political acts (and cultural acts — in that they are symbolic and signifying). In the context of recent disciplinary anthropology, they operate to legitimize claims to knowledge and authority. This is just as true of assertions that PhD credentials justify knowledge as are assertions of group unity under a particular ethnic or national label. It is not possible (nor desirable in a world dominated by sound bites and Wikipedia) to get rid of authoritative (i.e. expert) speech, be it based on lived experience or intellectual endeavours. But we should guard against authority (expertise, experience or indigeneity) deployed as a claim to exclusive rights to speak on a subject or about “a people”.

The questions around “indigenous” anthropological knowledge highlight the broader truth that all constructions of anthropological knowledge are acts of subjective production aimed at intersubjective communication. I write from the standpoint of what I know with the aim of communicating my thoughts and understandings to others. A purpose of anthropological training (and critical social scientific training more generally) is for researchers to learn to recognize and make explicit patterns of cultural thoughts and social practice, which as human beings we are all able to readily engage in but because these processes are habitual they are often difficult for us to articulate. The much vaunted and much disparaged tradition of fieldwork “abroad” is in its simplest sense aimed at placing the anthropologist as subjective interpreter of the world into situations that force a reconsideration of familiar cultural frames of reference. As Kim (in *The Making of Anthropology*) points out, for many anthropologists from outside of the West, subjective cultural displacement has been experienced as much in the process of gaining a degree from an American or European university as from fieldwork “abroad.” The extent to which this replicates the defamiliarization entailed in fieldwork deserves further consideration.

Several authors address the problem of indigenization and native anthropology in light of the thesis that “anthropology is the study of alterity par excellence” (Chatterji in *Asian Anthropology*: 162). Arguments that anthropology is “the study of others” can be traced back at least as far as Fabian's (1983) critique of anthropological temporality and Abu-Lughod's (1991) call to abandon the concept of culture. The problem with framing anthropology in this way is that it confuses the traditional *method* of anthropology (in fact just one dominant method) with the *object* of anthropology. Anthropology is the study of human beings. All of us who are both anthropologists and human beings are studying our own species.

The focus on “others” and on what the Euro-American academy considered as being “primitive peoples” has always been a *method* of anthropology rather than its sole object. In the course of the disciplinary development of anthropology, its occupation of the “savage slot” (Trouillot 1991) within a Eurocentric and later America-centric world system of social science, and the overwhelming utilization of the particular method of participant-observation outside of the researchers familiar cultural paradigm, anthropology came to be

perceived as the study of non-European peoples and cultures. Many anthropologists have unfortunately adopted this as self-definition of their discipline, in which they have been aided and abetted by geopolitics of European colonialism and American Cold War ideology, which fueled support for area studies in the American context.

The Challenge of Postcolonial and Methodological Nationalism

Scholarship is always infused with politics that in one way or another (even in resistance) must make reference to sponsoring institutions, which since the 19th century have predominantly been states (either colonial or national). The political economy of scholarly production is such that it relies on various forms of patronage — whether state sponsored, corporate, or independently funded by private donors. All of these patrons have their own political agendas and scholars must work within those systems (the concept of being “outside” of the system is in fact merely an illusion produced by such personages as the *systemically* created “gentleman scholar” of the 19th century, politically disenfranchised rogue scholars, or scholars such as those in the United States who have been politically protected to some degree by an ethic of “academic freedom” — itself a cultural, circumscribed and often contested value). The systemic political-economic forces that tied anthropology to European colonial and American pseudo-colonial practices in the 19th and 20th centuries have a substantial parallel in the dominance of methodological nationalism among anthropological traditions in the second half of the 20th century.

One expression of politically driven shifts in social research is various rejections of anthropology in favour of sociology. In India, the prominent social theorist M.N. Srinivas rejected the label of “anthropologist” in favour of “sociologists” (Chatterji in *Asian Anthropology*: 163). In the 1950s, T.S.G. Moelia, professor of Sociology at University of Indonesia, led an attack on anthropology as a colonial discipline in an unsuccessful attempt to suppress the establishment of anthropology within the university (Prager in *Asian Anthropology*: 192–193). Likewise, based on similar postcolonial and modernizing impulses, anthropology has never established substantial institutional recognition in Singapore.

The irony in postcolonial rejectionist stances toward anthropology, as much as they are wholly understandable given the larger political context, is that of all the social science and humanities disciplines of the Western academy, it is not hard to argue that anthropologists were at the forefront of arguing that peoples and cultures outside of the Euro-American world deserved to be treated with the intellectual and human respect that Europeans and Americans showed to each other. Similarly, anthropologists were often at the forefront of activities aimed at creating a more inclusive approach to the social sciences, especially with regard to engaging with indigenous intellectuals. Prager (in *Asian Anthropology*: 184–185) notes this of De Josselin de Jong’s call for greater participation of Indonesian students in 1935 and the pedagogy of Dutch anthropologist Duyvendak at the Batavia Law College in the late 1930s, which presaged Chakrabarty’s suggestions for “provincializing Europe” by more than half a century (cf. Ribeiro and Escobar in *World Anthropologies*: 3–4).

Strategic subaltern rejections of anthropology are based in legitimate grievances with the political economy of the production of knowledge. Yet at the same time they are often infused with disciplinary biases (such as that of quantitatively inclined American sociologists) and aimed at the most proximate target of colonial social science — the sojourning anthropologists, whose objectives while far from untainted by the colonial political economies

within which they operated, nevertheless as a discipline sought intersubjective engagement with so called “primitive peoples” in ways that sociologists and others (at disciplinary level if not always individually) deemed beyond the pale.

Where anthropology has flourished, in the context of postcolonial, nation-building projects, national traditions of anthropology have commonly been biased toward identification of a singular, unified “national culture,” as Moon argues for Korea (in *Asian Anthropology*: 123–124). Whether construed as sociology or anthropology, post-colonial and early nationalist study of society and culture has reinforced and been reinforced by a homologous framing of nation (largely defined in terms of territorial nation-state) and society. Exceptions abound, including supranational frames such as Andeanism and *interculturalidad* in Latin America (de la Caneda in *World Anthropologies*) and subnational regionalism as in the case of Spain (Narotzky in *World Anthropologies*). But the overwhelming norm has been the development of nation-state bound anthropological endeavours. Scholars as citizens of each new nation-state are encouraged by their local academic communities and often as well by American or European based supervisors to focus on their “own” societies. Japan is one of the few locations outside of Europe and North America with a robust and expanding tradition of anthropological research conducted outside national boundaries (see especially *The Making of Anthropology*). Encouragingly, these three collections themselves attest to a moment at which scholars from various national traditions are seeking out connections with others on the periphery unmediated by the metropole.

It is worth considering as well, in light of the strong methodological nationalism of the many traditions discussed in these three volumes, that the orientation of the largest professional anthropological body, the American Anthropological Association seems ever-more inward looking in the early 21st century. The amount of attention that the Association devoted to Hurricane Katrina, for example, seems extraordinarily parochial, when compared to the vastly more devastating Indian Ocean tsunami occurring less than a year earlier. Likewise, the recently launched and otherwise superb, AAA-sponsored website on Understanding Race (www.understandingrace.org) is so America-centric that it is only marginally useful in teaching about the issue of race in places outside the United States. All of this is arguably an outcome of the move toward greater legitimacy of “studying one’s own society” in the American anthropological tradition. In this, the AAA is becoming evermore singularly *American* in its orientation; not that I am suggesting it was ever not “America-centric” nor that there is any real reason to truly expect it to be otherwise. But the move away from emphasis on *methodological alterity* in anthropology is not without its costs.

Anthropological Pluralism as Disciplinary Ideal

It is possible that the movement toward increasing parochialism of the dominant American academy might provide breathing room for a flourishing of the world anthropologies envisioned by the authors of the three volumes. But this is not likely to happen without a concerted effort on the part of anthropologists engaged with various national and regional traditions. In this regard, a final significant but in most cases implicit issue raised by the three collections is the purpose of anthropology in the contemporary world. Ribeiro and Escobar as well as Fabian (in the introduction and conclusion of *World Anthropologies* respectively) raise the question directly. In both cases, the authors present “world anthro-

pologies” as a floating concept, which contains many possibilities but resists closure. Ribeiro and Escobar are particularly inclined toward politically engaged anthropological practice. At the same time, they encourage “world anthropologies... likened to a garden in which many species proliferate, and we should only nourish it without aiming to control it” (*World Anthropologies*: 23). The latter sentiments seem particularly important, but do not always sit comfortably with the former. The ideal of disciplinary pluralism often comes in conflict with political as well as scholarly and epistemological commitments of various sorts. Ribeiro and Escobar, for instance, are at least moderately critical of a modernist stance and Geertz’s purpose to “enlarge the universe of human discourse” as well as post-structuralist critical deconstruction (ibid.:19–20). Yet it would seem that both of these should continue to hold a place in the open, ongoing development of a discipline that values epistemic pluralism.

The crux of the important essays provided by the three books considered here is the crucial and intricate broadening of our scholarly interpretive communities articulated in the concept of world anthropologies. These three volumes are in fact just the tip of an iceberg, announcing a moment of history when post-colonial, national anthropological traditions are stringing together webs of interconnections, reconfiguring the networked topology of world anthropologies in ways that promise to produce anthropological communities of interpretation with a richer diversity than that of the previous century. Ones in which ideally the scholarship of the next generation of figures such as Koentjaraningrat, Yanagita, Srinivas, Ishida, Fei Xiaotong, and others will be as widely known as that of Boas, Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, or Geertz. For this to happen, we must get on with the job.

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