

Comments on “Changing global flows in anthropological knowledge”

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Abstract: These comments—made originally in my role as discussant for the panel in Ljubljana—address the recent history of the question of world anthropologies and identify three issues for further critical debate: (1) hegemonic claims concerning our discipline (including the issue of hegemony within our discipline), (2) the difference between power and authority, and (3) reasons that alterity continues to be a crucial concept in post-colonial anthropology.

Keywords: alterity, authority, hegemony, post-colonial anthropology, power

The articles in this theme section present a complicated picture of world anthropologies. Each author raised points that I could agree or disagree with; all of them deserve serious consideration. In the space provided, I recall the point of departure or prehistory of this exchange and comment on what I perceive to be shared premises and targets of debate, and engage in some criticism and provocation—tasks I can distinguish but find difficult to keep separate.

World anthropologies

As I understood it, the World Anthropologies initiative involved two things. One of them was finding forums and media, and building networks for anthropology outside its metropolitan centers in the US, Britain, and France. But the lateral or “horizontal” moves that this implied and advocated were only one part of the

project. The other was to contest the hegemony of the centers—a “vertical” move. Since I and others like me were invited, for instance, to the Wenner-Gren Conference on World Anthropologies, now documented in the recent volume edited by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and Arturo Escobar (2006), I thought that the alliances envisaged were not so much (or certainly not only) among “peripheral” anthropologies but also among critical, cosmopolitan anthropologists irrespective of their places of work on the globe. I do not think now, and I know that I did not think then, that the idea of plural “anthropologies” was originally or principally meant to focus on anthropology as practiced in different nation states. That, among others, is the reason I think that debate about world anthropologies and initiatives such as the World Anthropologies Network (<http://www.ram-wan.net>) are but tactical moves in a strategy to establish a cosmopolitan World Anthropology, not as a uni-

versalist fiction but as a goal and process. The volume edited by Ribeiro and Escobar has “disciplinary transformations” in its subtitle. It clearly argues that anthropology itself must change if existing hegemonic relations are to change. The idea of plural anthropologies, much like the idea of plural knowledges, may now have to recede into the background, although it was provocative at first and helped to initiate a good debate. There are no other anthropologies; there are only anthropologists who work under other historical, economic, organizational, and professional conditions. Anthropology practiced anywhere is, in my view, cosmopolitan, or it ceases to be a science of mankind.

Hegemony

The more I think about these matters the more questions I have. To begin with, the catch with “hegemony”—much like with “center and periphery” in world-systems theory in vogue a few decades ago but apparently still not quite dead—is that it comes over as a seemingly neutral, abstract figure of thought about power arrangements. But the relations it refers to here in our debate were historically constituted by imperialist expansion and are kept in place politically and economically by global capitalism. Now, contesting hegemony implies acknowledging that hegemony exists. Hegemony, to use current parlance, is essentialized. Hence, the question is what exactly is being contested. Is it hegemony “as such,” or the specific hegemonic claims of one or the other center?

Contesting hegemony as such would mean working toward anarchist forms of academic teaching, research, and professional organization. I am inclined to see this as an ideal, but I know that it is not a realistic aim. Contesting specific hegemonies would mean removing or undermining the foundations of their power. Can this be done other than by finding foundations for an alternative that would probably be another hegemony? Another complication I can mention here is that hegemonic, hierarchical relations within anthropology are also affected

by the relations anthropology has with other disciplines reflected in citations, invitations to lecture, joint teaching appointments and research projects, and so forth. And that makes the concept of hegemony even more elusive.

Power and Authority

But maybe the problem in this debate lies somewhere else, namely, in an equivocation of, or confusion among, forms of authority and power. I can think of scientific, organizational, and institutional power as well as intellectual authority. Of course, scientific/intellectual authority needs organizational/institutional support. The authorities in our field must make a living somewhere. But the danger, a very real one as we all know, is that intellectual authority is increasingly measured, even defined, by the amount of funds, the size of teams and networks, and short-term cost-profit efficiency called productivity. If, on that account, US anthropology is also a leader, this is hardly a hegemonic position worth contesting. The problem is not American hegemony, at least not as long as the American Anthropological Association does not become outright suppressive and destructive. The problem is that capitalism, after turning global, is now about to usurp the prerogative of reason itself as a universal court of humanity, as the Enlightenment philosophers put it. To a degree that has become scary, the critical pursuit of knowledge, research, teaching, and publishing, once supported by capital—state or private—has become an outlet, occasion, and pretext for capital in search of purpose, meaning, and legitimacy other than profit. Of course, we anthropological academics are “small fry” compared to the (mis)use capital has for disease, hunger, poverty—or the arts, democracy, and what not.

Epistemology

In his contribution to this collection, Michal Buchowski, relates hegemony to a “dominant

epistemology.” Epistemology—accounting for processes of knowledge production in a given discipline—can be adequate or inadequate, developed or lacking. It can be critical and debatable but it cannot wield power and be dominant. It does make sense, however, to speak of a dominant episteme; after all, the term was invented in order to bring knowledge and power conceptually together, even though we need to remember that Foucault developed his conceptual apparatus for critical analysis “after the fact,” as a historian. I take it that our main concern here is not to retrace the history of anthropological discourse, important as it may be to know and understand that history. We want to explore present possibilities of communicating between and across epistemes and regimes of knowledge, possibilities that are not doomed to reproduce existing or imagined power relations. That is why we should, whenever we take a heavy dose of Foucault on power, keep the antidote, especially on authority. Established powers, such as traditions and bureaucracies, are not immune to intellectual innovation. Priests may dismiss prophets; and bureaucrats may shrug off charismatic leaders, while, at the same time, fearing them for good reasons, as history has repeatedly shown.

Lest you take these pronouncements as those of an incurable idealist and romantic, I remind you that taking up the study of movements, rather than limiting ourselves to tribes, institutions, and societies, has in the past liberated anthropology from the straight-jackets of functionalism, Parsonian systems-theory, and structuralism, not to forget the concomitant “irruption of time” that forced us to recognize the co-temporality and contemporaneity of those whom we study. Am I mistaken in my conviction that now, a generation later, we face a similar and perhaps even more formidable challenge when we come together to discuss the global flow of anthropological knowledge? What is “globalization,” fact or fate? And what about “global flow of knowledge”? Leaving aside the inappropriateness of flow as an aquatic or electronic metaphor, are we prepared to think

about the production and representation of knowledge as a process without agency?

Anthropology and alterity

Though this remains a matter for debate, it is widely agreed that anthropology emerged as a discipline with an object it construed as an Other. Alterity has been constitutive of our field of inquiry as well as, but less obviously than of its guiding concepts and research agendas from kinship to culture. As a concept it was ostensibly first expressed by terms such as savage or primitive and later by the addition of phrases like “so-called” or the replacement of the original terms by tribal, traditional, and preliterate. That anthropology was invented from the perspective, and in the context, of Western colonialism and imperialism. Tacit assumptions are powerful and dangerous.

I was reminded of this when I read the papers presented at the Ljubljana conference, some of them included here as articles in revised form. Implicit and sometimes explicit preoccupation with alterity was regarded by some as, at best, a thing of a past that world anthropologies do not share. In some cases, it appears regarded as, at worst, a hegemonic instrument or a dominant post-colonial discourse wielded by metropolitan anthropology. Given the undeniable fact that more and more anthropologists study their own societies, or societies like their own, the conclusion that alterity has become irrelevant seems inescapable. If this were true, it would logically mean either that alterity has never been constitutive of anthropology or that for much of what is currently called anthropology the label has been a deceptive homonym.

Alterity—that is, being other—is not the same thing as being exotic, foreign, or even just a stranger. On the contrary, as a theoretical concept, alterity served to criticize ideological views of cultural difference. However, *Ideologiekritik* was only part of what anthropology had to accomplish in order to overcome its colonial-imperial heritage. More important, certainly in

the long run, was *Erkenntniskritik*, starting with the realization that anthropology has been practiced through, and based itself on, empirical research, and that it needed epistemological foundations other than the basically positivist principles that had helped establish our field in colonial times as an academic discipline.

Among the alternatives that have emerged is the idea of conceiving of ethnography as communicative, inter-subjective, and coeval, and the commitment to do this explicitly. Implicitly I am convinced that "good" ethnography (that is, the production of knowledge that does more than impose or project our own preconceived ideas on others) has always worked that way. In other words, I believe that the concept of alterity is essential to any theory of knowledge that does not or cannot bracket the question of inter-subjectivity. If such a position were accepted, it follows that so-called First-, Second-, and Third World anthropologists face essentially the same epistemological problems, regardless of levels of economic development or degrees of involvement in globalization, and also regardless of whether they study their own societies or other societies.

Does the conclusion to which my argument about alterity has led me hold, if and when anthropology changes its theoretical and empirical center of attention from difference to identity? Several articles in this thematic section state that such a move is under way when they complain about hegemonic anthropology's fascination with the Third World, or about lack of recognition for the accomplishments of auto-ethnographic scholarly traditions developed, above all, in Central and Eastern Europe. This is reminiscent of concerns voiced in the debate

about world anthropologies. My response would be that, on the level of theory, thinking about alterity is essential to critical thought about identity, especially if identity is understood as a historical process.

True, I like to think of anthropology as a movement and of anthropologists as prophets but movements, as Weber taught us, undergo routinization and prophets must face the mundane challenges of making it through the day. Getting organized to contest the hegemonic claims of anthropology organized in metropolitan centers is a reasonable undertaking—as long as we do not equate reason with organization.

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