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The Future of Anthropology Lies in Its Own Past: A Plea for the Ethnographic Archive

There is probably no other academic discipline that has been declared dead by its proponents as often as anthropology. Awareness of the irretrievable loss of societies, which researchers and scholars have studied since the nineteenth century, first in anthropological associations, then at museums for ethnology and at universities, is older than the discipline itself. We find this awareness in the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas, the great defender of human rights for indigenous Americans, as well as in those of Joseph-François Lafitau, who is commonly regarded one of the most important precursors of academic anthropology. This melancholic narrative is as much alive today as throughout the history of the discipline, despite the fact that anthropology would never have come into existence if this assumption had been correct.1

At first glance, the title of this article seems to follow in this tradition. But it is important not to misunderstand its meaning. I do not believe that anthropology has no future. Rather, I propose that the discipline’s future will strongly depend on how anthropologists will deal with its past achievements. I certainly have no desire to indulge in the pessimism normally propounded by our discipline. Instead, I intend to illustrate the degree to which the data that anthropologists have so far gathered will become all the more significant as time progresses.
TRANSFORMATIONS: A RETROSPECTIVE
Since anthropology was established as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century, its proponents have given priority to studying relatively isolated, homogenous local cultures in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. These cultures existed among communities that were kinship-based, face-to-face, and wholly self-sufficient. Today, however, such societies have become rare. Even in the most remote areas of New Guinea or the Amazon, the influences of globalization have left their mark.

Along with the societies that constituted anthropology’s classic subject matter, the discipline’s methods and perspectives have also changed. The big break began during the early 1980s with the self-critical movement primarily catalyzed by a cohort of up-and-coming scholars, which has since been called the “Writing Culture Debate” in the recent history of the discipline. Like the positivism debate that gripped German sociology in the 1960s, some 20 years later debates about objectively fair and politically correct forms of representation embroiled Anglo-Saxon anthropology. The debate was initially triggered by the unreflected positivist claims of classic ethnographic monographs, which stood in sharp contrast to the extremely personal field experience that was constitutive of the discipline’s hallmark method: participant observation.

Anthropological objectivism was not in fact endogenous to the discipline itself. Historically, the founding fathers of Anglo-Saxon cultural and social anthropology owed their positivist orientation to the natural sciences. It was no coincidence that Franz Boas, Alfred C. Haddon, William Halse R. Rivers, Baldwin Spencer, and Bronislaw Malinowski all initially studied the natural sciences, having obtained their PhDs in geology, neuroscience, biology, and physics, respectively, before choosing to pursue anthropology. For these scholars, the village was analogous to the sort of controlled experimental setting under which one studied phenomena in the natural sciences. It was therefore the ethnographer’s task to describe and analyze how individual elements in this “closed system” were interrelated and how they interacted. Hence, the term “field” that came to designate the site of
ethnographic data collection was chosen not because of associations with an agricultural “field” or with a military field over which one is to take command. Rather, it was borrowed from physics, where it had been introduced some 20 years previously by Max Planck. Against this positivist tradition, the proponents of postmodern anthropology began to problematize aspects of the field experience that had up until that point only been regarded as unfortunate disturbances in what was otherwise a controlled empirical setting. However, by the time this critique of anthropology’s positivist pretensions began to be voiced, the point was more or less already moot. By then the supposedly homogenous, autarchic societies that had constituted the discipline’s field had all but vanished.

Small homogenous cultures were replaced by larger social networks with enormous internal dynamics characterized by the effects of hybridization and appropriation, fusion, and fission. In the course of this process, cultures have not only become internally multifaceted but have also lost their territorial boundedness as communities become integrated into wider networks that may be transregional or even transnational. The nation-state lost, and continues to lose, its meaning as it is easily transgressed by global mobility. To cope with what are perceived to be threats to the nation-state, such as the waves of migration from the South as people flee in search of work or simply to escape violence and poverty, states have become quite willing to relinquish national and political sovereignty in order to join together to fortify their outer borders against incursions, as the case of the European Union shows.

Since ethnographers have never sought to study cultures in their entirety but rather have tended to focus on understanding face-to-face relationships in small social and cultural units, these developments do not mean that ethnography lost its field of investigation. On the contrary, transnational diaspora cultures in fact share the modest demographic extent characteristic of the communities anthropologists once studied in the Golden era of field research. Diaspora cultures2 and village communities thus have more in common than one might
think. The former are communities that form particular subsystems within larger social units but that also transcend these limited units through their external transnational connections. And yet, regardless of how closed off these diaspora communities seem to be, they cannot be equated with the local cultures that were the object of inquiry in conventional ethnographic studies. Of course, traditional village communities were also never as homogenous and isolated as they appear to be in the monographs describing them. The external relations in which such villages were always imbricated tended to be neglected in anthropological studies, mainly because such interactions were insignificant with regard to the homeostasis of internal social relations. They were thus simply not relevant to the research questions being posed by the discipline at the time. Transnational diasporas, however, are different. They are embedded in a network of external relations that they first create and then use to determine the internal relations of its members.

Although the societies whose descriptions the Writing Culture Debate criticized had long begun to change, the debate continued into the late 1990s. George Marcus, one of its most prominent early protagonists, was one of the few who recognized how sterile the debate had become. In a pragmatic move, he turned his back on the problem of representation in order to focus on methodological issues. As early as 1995, he proposed multi—sited ethnography as a method that would be more appropriate to the context of the sorts of social transformations that had taken hold of most of the world. This methodology (Marcus 1995) amounts in essence to the claim that ethnographers should be as mobile as the people they study. This means that they should join them and visit where they live and work as well as the centers of power that decide their fate: government agencies, branches of multinational companies, nongovernmental organizations, and so forth. Marcus used the motto “follow the people” to refer to the actors as well as to the commodities, goods, and artifacts they produce.

With this new research agenda, George Marcus made anthropology both easier and more difficult at the same time. Doing anthropology
became more difficult in the sense that if one were to regard it as a supplement to traditional participant observation, not only would an ethnographer have to spend the obligatory two years in the field to learn a foreign language and culture, he would also have to investigate the associated diaspora communities throughout the world. On the other hand, multi-sited ethnography promised to make things easier for those researchers who considered it an alternative rather than a supplement to or an extension of the conventional local fieldwork. It would allow hyperactive researchers to rush from locality to locality, laptop and recording devices in hand, allowing themselves to succumb to a form of professional attention deficit syndrome. This disconcerting development presses upon us the question as to whether such practice really has anything to do with the established methodological traditions of our profession, and where it leaves the specifically anthropological added value of our research, How would our practices of knowledge production differ from those of sociology, political science, or other neighboring disciplines for whom the study of globalization has been a mainstay of the research agenda for a much longer period?

This creeping trend toward the sociologization and political-scientization of anthropology seems to be in full line with the fact that, in a time of increasing political correctness, the discipline’s central methodological postulate began to step into the background—a postulate that has always been the largest and most important distinctive characteristic of anthropology in the study of culture and society. Here I am referring to our own specialized methodology, which is based on crossing the borders between the culture of the researcher and the researched culture. It is to this methodology that anthropology, without any doubt, owes its most important insights. Postcolonial critics have falsely associated this approach with the infamous “othering,” which emphasizes cultural difference by stereotyping the cultural others, a practice that has, since the beginning of the Writing Culture Debate, been considered the indelible original sin of anthropology.

The accusation of othering has not only contributed to a fundamental denial of cultural difference but also to the folklorization
of anthropology. Indeed, while folklorists apply the methods and theories that have emerged from our discipline to the investigation of their own objects, some anthropologists are pushing for approaches that are sometimes suspiciously reminiscent of the “blood and soil” romanticism some nationalist German folklorists adhered to in the early twentieth century. As many indigenous anthropologists claim: you can only write about your own culture; those who have been born into a particular culture have the proper credentials at hand to describe it. The postcolonial critics of the old European anthropology advocate “Anthropology at Home,” a call that in some cases amounted to promoting a new kind of paternalism. By reconceiving the discipline’s task as giving the subaltern her voice, postcolonial anthropologists have unwittingly resurrected a claim that harks back to the era of direct colonial rule.3 These are moral arguments that one cannot simply dismiss. But from whom did the voice of the subaltern get their mandate? Are members of the Indian upper class really closer to India’s lower classes and indigenous minorities? Do these classes and minorities feel aptly represented by their “self-appointed” voice?

Often these and other arguments are only put forward to hide the fact that such differentiation does not take place between cultures but within a culturally and linguistically homogenous academic community. When spokespeople for the postcolonial movement come from Palestine, India, or the Arab world, they, along with their counterparts from Western countries, speak English. Furthermore, their classically academic publications are not directed at a domestic audience but are instead meant to be read by an English-speaking, academic audience. References to origins are often only used in academic debates for strategic purposes, since it shields scholarly positions from criticism.

It is nevertheless true that researchers who have spoken the language of the ethnic group they are studying since childhood have a decisive advantage in terms of language competence, and the same can be said of their intimate familiarity with the local lifestyle, norms, and values. That intimate familiarity, however, also poses dangers as it can easily lead to blindness. Behaviors that seem strange to—in the
literal sense—outsiders can be viewed from the inside as cultural “givens” nobody ever thought about. And what about the dangers associated with the self-idealization and self-overestimation of one’s own culture? From the history of European fascist movements, we are well aware of the degree to which folklore-based ideologies were present at their creation. In Germany, for instance, a tightly nationalist-oriented Volkskunde or folklore had shared in its fascist creation to the extent that some folklorists are still working to remedy this past today. As a result, the discipline, which emerged from German studies, has undergone a radical methodological transformation. When German folklorists today refer to their discipline as “empirical cultural studies,” “European anthropology,” or even “cultural anthropology,” they are not only emphasizing a shift in research perspective; they are also distancing themselves from the political appropriation of their field that clouds their disciplinary history.

Summing up the arguments so far, it could be said that the transformations anthropology has undergone over the last two decades have mirrored the transformations of global society itself. As a result, the data that anthropologists collect today are of a fundamentally different quality than those recorded during the classical phase of ethnography. Findings are no longer as varied and colorful as they once were in the past, and they also seem to be far less exotic. But their importance has increased. The latest political events in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, or Mali show how quickly local conflicts can escalate and how they can draw in the entire global community. Anthropological expertise is therefore needed more than ever. In Europe as well, the relevant government agencies have recognized the value of anthropological research. Anthropologists’ self-confidence is growing. They know about the social value of the knowledge they are gathering. That this knowledge is of course often used against those from whom anthropologists obtain it is another matter.

And it is in this connection that a number of fundamental questions must be asked. Are the collections of knowledge that have emerged from recent empirical research even comparable to older
findings? Has—through the process of sociologization, political scientization, folklorization, and indigenization—classical anthropology just become another social science? Does the quantitative increase in knowledge correspond to increased quality? Can the anthropological knowledge we have gained over the course of the last two decades even be considered anthropological knowledge at all?

**THE ETHNOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE**

While new ethnographic research is now primarily funded by states under the guise of the preservation of “world peace” (and therefore in the interest of maintaining their own political supremacy), the results of older ethnographic research in both the former British settler colonies as well as in the colonies that gained independence since the end of World War II have received growing attention. This renewed interest in older ethnographic studies often comes from the indigenous populations in these areas. For these indigenous peoples, the knowledge compiled by anthropologists has a twofold value: it provides information about how their culture once was and, at the same time, it allows them to justify their claims against the state and society.

The early beginnings of academic anthropology can be found in the Enlightenment, particularly the first major, primarily scholarly-oriented expeditions to the South Pacific. As such, anthropologists have been documenting non-European traditional ways of life in words and images for quite some time. These ethnographic accounts currently constitute the most important and often the only sources for the history of indigenous cultures, which often did not have a written tradition of their own. Throughout the world, in North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, Polynesia, Micronesia and the Melanesian islands, South and Southeast Asia, and Africa we can observe how the political spokespeople and indigenous public intellectuals use classical ethnographies to reconstruct their past. But this does not simply serve to preserve their own cultural identity. The reference to the accumulated knowledge collected by European researchers also has economic and commercial implications. For example, proof of ownership
rights supporting the claims of individual ethnic groups that have been the subject of legal cases brought to American, Australian, Canadian, New Zealand or South African courts can only be determined on the basis of such written records. Calls for the return of territories that had been expropriated in the course of colonization have made the historical records of these travelers, missionaries, and anthropologists important. In a similar manner, such ethnographic data has helped indigenous people successfully press their legal claims against large multinational corporations.4

The use of ethnographic data to secure the legal rights of indigenous societies, as well as to provide a written record about the ways of their ancestors, or as a resource to help these societies revive their political and social institutions, beliefs, rituals, and values, was a practice that originally developed in the former British settler colonies, but which is now common in many of the postcolonial states that have emerged since 1945. The published and unpublished ethnographic accounts currently stored in libraries, museums, universities, and research institutes have thus acquired eminent value as the archives of these peoples’ cultural heritage. In light of the self-critical turn that emerged in the 1980s, the revalidation of ethnographic data as authenticated historical source material has brought about a rather paradoxical situation. For nearly a decade and a half, the representation debate criticized the false objectivism of classical anthropological studies, highlighting their many errors, shortcomings, and biases. The notion that subjective value judgments can be found in any description of a foreign culture and can distort reality is now commonplace. When commenting on their own cultures, anthropologists have tended to take a distanced critical stance, whereas when studying foreign societies they have tended to take on an idealizing stance. This observation, first made by Claude Lévi-Strauss more than 50 years ago, is truer today than ever.

It is precisely these idealizing tendencies, rooted in anthropologists’ understanding of ethnography as cultural critique by contrasting the virtues of the foreign culture with the deficiencies of one’s
own, that make these idealized anthropological representations so attractive to indigenous people. While the protagonists of the Writing Culture Debate questioned the academic value of many ethnographic accounts, the current tendency is for the descendants of former ethnographic informants (as they were once referred to) and the ethnic groups once studied to ease such doubts, particularly in cases where the ethnographic accounts bolster their own self-image. Some ethnic groups have even gone so far as to use this resurgence in the value of classical ethnography to revive extinct social and cultural traditions. In Native American Studies departments at North American universities, the reconstruction of the cultural history of individual tribal groups is primarily carried out by indigenous researchers who identify with or are members of the tribe. Lacking other options, however, they inevitably make recourse to data from ethnographic and linguistic materials that were compiled at a time when indigenous people were not permitted to attend universities. One could refer to this as the "Pygmalion Effect" of ethnographic research: contemporary indigenous societies are now actively reappropriating what anthropologists had once reported about the lives of their ancestors. Through these neotraditionalist movements, carefully documented customs and traditions are revitalized and readopted as an integral part of indigenous cultural identity.

**FUTURE PERSPECTIVES**

However critical or uncritical our assessment of the knowledge stored in the ethnographic archives may be, the fact remains that today it has great practical value, even if many anthropologists have as yet to realize this. Instead, most anthropologists continue to do what they have always done as members of their discipline: they collect heaps of new empirical data while neglecting the systematic analysis of the ethnographic knowledge collected by earlier generations of researchers. Certainly, new research is necessary. New empirical studies justify the discipline’s continued existence. That the boundaries between anthropology and its related social and cultural disciplines are becoming increasingly blurred
is another matter. At the same time, I am not implying that this alone is a sufficient reason that anthropology should be thoroughly historized. However, what I am suggesting is that the discipline’s historical dimensions be given more attention and that we come to realize that our disciplinary strength lies not only in our methods of fieldwork but also in our archives.

Above all, efforts ought to be made to ensure that the results of ethnographic research are made available to whom they belong. This should not only be done with regard to new empirical data but also for older ethnographic accounts and field notes. We must ensure that these documents are made available to those who need them presently because they support their legal claims or even simply because they are an integral part of their cultural heritage. Only a small percentage of research materials collected by early ethnographers in the nineteenth century and by professionally trained ethnographers since the beginning of the classical field research period have ever been published. Every anthropologist who has spent the customary one-and-a-half to two years in the field knows that (s)he has more data than could ever be analyzed and published in a lifetime. After all, once the research is completed, (s)he must return to other tasks; one’s university career in anthropology usually begins after fieldwork has been completed, a moment that marks an important rite of passage in the discipline. Bronislaw Malinowski, the founder of participant observation, is a prime example. Over the course of his two-year stay with the Trobrianders, Malinowski published three monographs comprising nearly 1,500 pages and countless essays. However, his literary estate contains even more material that was never published. His field diaries, for example, were only compiled and edited by his widow 25 years after his death.

Admittedly, Malinowski’s productivity as an ethnographer is quite exceptional. But I would estimate that anthropologists actually publish less than half the data they collect. The rest is left to their heirs or ends up boxed up in their papers in archives. However, even published field reports are accessible to indigenous groups to only a
limited extent if they are not written in English but instead are composed in languages that are no longer, or never were, part of the international educational canon. An immense corpus of ethnographic knowledge exists in anthropological archives outside the Anglo-Saxon world. Anthropological museums, collections, and institutes in France, Germany, the Netherlands, or Japan are no less rich in ethnographic material. They harbor written records, audio recordings, photographs, drawings, and films of unique cultural and historical value. These are veritable treasure troves, the importance of which for the preservation of the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples has been long underestimated. That the significance of these ethnographic materials was first recognized in the former British settler colonies has to do with the emergence of indigenous movements there and their successful struggle for political equality. In these ethnographic resources, they found the “legal documents” that could be used to substantiate their claims in national courts. In France, too, there has for years been an ongoing effort to sort the material available in local museums, research institutes, and colonial archives, and to make it available to the academic public. In Germany, this task has been undertaken only to a limited degree. This is all the more regrettable, as explorers and anthropologists from German-speaking countries have since the nineteenth century been active throughout the world. It would be a desideratum to catalog systematically all written and audiovisual documentation stored in the numerous anthropological museums, collections, and mission archives in the German-speaking world. If these materials were all catalogued, regional experts could edit them and translate the texts into the contemporary working languages of those communities whose cultures were being documented.

But this would only be a first step towards comprehensive international cooperation. For more than 30 years, anthropological museums have been confronted with demands for repatriation of the artifacts they house to their countries of origins. The museums have, however, only complied with these demands in a relatively limited number of cases, the argument being that poorer countries “are not
able” to ensure the proper storage and care of such delicate museum objects that are of such great cultural and historical value. The repatriation of anthropological knowledge to the countries from which anthropologists once took it is a much more straightforward task. Once the documents, images, and audio recordings are digitized, they can easily be stored on a computer or an external drive and be returned to their countries of origin. Another option would be to create an online digital anthropological archive indexed by country and culture. This would allow both present-day groups interested in their cultural heritage and scholars throughout the world to access the ethnographic materials.

Yet such an international ethnographic archive is important not only because it would constitute a practical resource for indigenous people. It would also be an Inventarium anthropologicum containing materials that were collected at a time when individual cultures were autonomous to the extent that each could pursue its own solutions to problems common to all human societies, but at the same time connected enough to the outside world that cultural exchange between societies had become possible. Only such a comprehensive archive, consisting of published as well as unpublished materials ranging from expedition reports, field notes, and diaries, to speech and musical recordings, to drawings, watercolors, lithographs, copper and steel engravings, photographs and films, will finally provide the broad historical foundations to allow us to inquire into the nature and underlying conditions of the differences and similarities between cultures, and perhaps even find some answers.5

NOTES

1. A compilation of such arguments can be found in the chapters by Holger Jebens and Mark Münzel in the edited work, The End of Anthropology? (2011).
2. According to Zygmunt Baumann (2012: 101), there are more than 70 diaspora cultures in London alone today. For an early discussion of the diaspora concept in anthropology, see, for example, Matthias Krings (2003).
3. One of the most important representatives of this direction is the Indian scholar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2007). For a radical critique of this subalternist position, see, for example, Crapanzano (2011).

4. For an appeal for ethnographic documentation in the decisions of Australian courts, see P.H. Russell’s (2005) examination of the precedent case from 1992, which has become the “Mabo Case” in the literature. For the role played by claims for restitution for indigenous groups in Canada and New Zealand, see Maaka/Fleras (2005). For the San’s land-right claims in South Africa, see Zips (2009). For the differentiation of cultural patent rights, see M. Brown (2003) and Comaroff and Comaroff (2010).

5. A slightly revised and enlarged German version was published in Bierschenk, Thomas, Matthias Krings and Carola Lentz, eds., Ethnologie im 21. Jahrhundert, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 131–146.

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