

# **Cultural Studies will be the Death of Anthropology**

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vs  
Nigel Rapport & John Gledhill

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Peter Wade

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## PART 1 – THE PRESENTATIONS

*For the motion (1)*

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Strictly, cultural studies cannot be the death of anthropology as we know it because it is already dead. Now, if you must have a hand into which to thrust the smoking gun, cultural studies is the prime suspect. Put simply, anthropology has run out of episteme. But it had its day. Anthropologists did an important job in persuading Europeans that premodern peoples were not primitive or pre-rational, but were as human and culturally complex as they. Ethnocentrism however is still with us and, despite itself, the way anthropology is constituted as a form of knowledge implicates it too.

The world has changed irrevocably since anthropology's heyday as a movement (as Meyer Fortes liked to remind us it was). So have our ideas about knowledge and understanding. Anthropology was part of an intellectual and political period of European history. While other disciplines may know no better, anthropologists have little excuse for perpetuating Eurocentrism. That is an epistemological imperialism which presumes that 'our' fashions of knowledge, interpretation, narrative and so forth may be splattered at will over the intellectual practices of our subjects of study. Anthropology is ill-suited to an increasingly post-disciplinary world, especially when cultural studies offers an alternative. Being predatory by nature, were anthropology not so deep in its dogmatic slumbers as to be moribund, it would have occupied the intellectual slot taken by cultural studies long ago.

Anthropologists are used to Jeremiahs proclaiming the end of the discipline. The institutional riposte runs: 'Rumours of the death of anthropology are exaggerated. There are more students, conferences, publications, essays to mark etc. than ever before. So it cannot be true'. Intellectual death however is often a condition of academic success. Neo-classical economics rests upon

pre-Darwinian assumptions;<sup>23</sup> and psychology upon a dichotomy of the individual-society, which is vacuous if not circular.<sup>24</sup> That anthropologists have been more self-critical than some is not an excuse for self-congratulation. The pragmatic, even heroic, criticism runs: 'Stop whingeing about the difficulties and get on with the job'. Doing precisely what? Since cultural studies specialists would argue that this includes reproducing the conditions of ideological domination of others, I am not sure I want to.

Anyway, what I call death, anthropological Panglosses interpret as the discipline's apotheosis. Anthropology's agenda has become part of the general grounds of the human sciences. Its key concept, culture, has been borrowed, elaborated and commoditised, even if anthropology cannot claim the exclusive franchise.

There are periodic stirrings in anthropology. But, like the British economic recovery, these are usually shadows of revolutions elsewhere. To judge from most major journals, seminars and course reading lists, you might wonder how far such changes really permeate academic practice. Is change not proof though of the discipline's vitality? Or is it part of a diaspora away from traditional concerns? Is anthropology then becoming comparative cultural studies? Or are anthropology and cultural studies really the same? Such definitional questions tend to be essentialist. Although the two appear to share their object of study—culture—as intellectual and historical practices they seem to belong to different worlds.

What do British tribal elders say? The last ASA Decennial conference was supposed to herald a resuscitated anthropology. Of the editors of the subsequent collections, Wendy James warned that 'anthropology should guard its own heritage', so hinting at the

<sup>23</sup> K. Smith, *The British economic crisis: its past and future*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1989, pp. 124-34.

<sup>24</sup> The distinction is itself both cultural and partly self-fulfilling, a point among others made by radical psychologists in Henriques et al., e.g. 'the individual is not a fixed or given entity, but rather a particular product of historically specific practices of social regulation' J. Henriques et al., *Changing the subject, psychology, social regulation and subjectivity*, London, Methuen, 1984, p. 12.

nostalgia which makes anthropology heritage studies.<sup>25</sup> Danny Miller less sanguinely appreciated the need to demonstrate 'the continued relevance of anthropology in the contemporary world', a preoccupation which makes no sense unless it had been seriously questioned. Henrietta Moore however let the cat out of the bag: 'anthropology is no longer a singular discipline, but rather a blend of practices engaged in a wide variety of social contexts'.<sup>26</sup> There is no longer any discipline to guard or relevance to demonstrate. Let me include our hosts today. Tim Ingold argued that 'anthropology is philosophy with the people in'.<sup>27</sup> (And I am told Dick Werbner's *Postcolonial identities in Africa* sells under a cultural studies' label.) Meanwhile in the real world, that flagship department of anthropology, Chicago, has become the centre of 'Transnational Cultural Studies'. The sound of anthropologists protesting their professional purity is being drowned by other, or even the same, people voting with their feet.

Are these not little local difficulties? A brief review suggests otherwise. Practically, research visas and funding are increasingly difficult. Many countries dislike anthropologists as much as journalists. Funding bodies are increasingly reallocating money as new 'priorities' (such as management studies) and new kinds of organic intellectual emerge. Anthropology's main task in the human sciences was to deal with premodern peoples and, as they began to disappear, with 'the primitive' or irrational in all of us (together with psychoanalysis). At this point however, the original political and intellectual rationale for anthropology effectively vanished, leaving us as proctologists of economic development or traditional intellectuals pining *au recherche du temps perdu*. Even if the richness of other ways of thinking and living risks being neglected or unappreciated, we need to ask on what authority we assume the right to represent others even to themselves? Is doing so not part of a long-standing habit of infantilising them?

Ontologically, what is the distinctive object of anthropological study or its relationship to our overarching

<sup>25</sup> See also J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (trans. P. Foss, P. Patton and P. Beitchman), New York, Semiotext(e), 1983, p. 13-23.

<sup>26</sup> The quotations are taken from the editor's blurb in the Routledge catalogue.

<sup>27</sup> T. Ingold, "Editorial" *Man* 27(4), 1992, p. 696.

concepts? This forum agreed that 'the concept of society is theoretically obsolete'.<sup>28</sup> Culture is long in the tooth and incoherently polymorphous, a problem for cultural studies too.<sup>29</sup> As Patterson put it, culture is 'something that's gone off a bit. It means mould. If you leave something in the fridge and you go off on a long holiday, it's a write-off. It develops a culture'.<sup>30</sup> Culture, like society, is a particular Euro-American holistic category which has gone off rather badly.<sup>31</sup> Without such transcendental objects, we are left simply with practices, including thinking about these practices. Society and culture, as massive suturing operations, were the necessary conditions of epistemological supremacy over our subjects of study. To the extent that cultural studies has taken culture as the conditions under which social divisions like class, gender and race are naturalised, represented and contested, it avoids the worst of transcendent totalising.

What surely is distinctive, indeed constitutive, of anthropology is ethnographic fieldwork by participant-observation. Anthropology's contribution to the human sciences has not been so much theory (we mostly test others' theories in practice) as a practice: ethnography. We tend to fetishise it though. By no means all anthropologists are good ethnographers; and many people do better ethnography than anthropologists (for example my

<sup>28</sup> T. Ingold (ed.), *The concept of society is theoretically obsolete*, Manchester, Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory, 1990.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion, see M. Hobart, *After culture? Anthropology as radical metaphysical critique*, Denpasar, Universitas Udayana Press, in press. See also J. Fabian, "Culture, time and the object of anthropology", in his *Time and the work of anthropology*, New York, Harwood, 1991, where he argues that culture is a retrospective and nostalgic notion.

<sup>30</sup> P. Clark, "Off the wall with Sir Les: an interview with Sir Les Patterson", *Evening Standard*, 20 November 1996. Sir Les Patterson, apart of course from being chairman of the Australian Cheese Board, is Cultural Attache at the Court of St. James. So he should know.

<sup>31</sup> M. Strathern, "Parts and wholes: refiguring relationships in a post-plural world" in *Conceptualizing society*, (ed.) A. Kuper, London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 76-77.

co-speaker, Paul Willis).<sup>32</sup> Its origins as an investigative method are dubious. It depended upon a conjunction of a naturalist and appropriative epistemology—facts are given, there to be collected and subsequently owned<sup>33</sup>—and the peculiar conditions epitomised by colonial government under which the inquiring ethnographer had the right to poke her nose into other peoples' lives and write about them without let, hindrance or consideration of the consequences for those described. Participant-observation is a polite phrase for 'voyeurism'.

The dislocations of ethnographic practice however have occasioned some superb original thinking. At its best intensive, interactive ethnography permits a unique kind of critical inquiry.<sup>34</sup> In principle at least, the people being interrogated may interrogate their questioner, revise the questions and even challenge the presuppositions behind them. Unfortunately, our epistemological practices get in the way. Our ideas of understanding presuppose intersubjectivity on terms always established by the anthropologist. Understanding is all too often one-way - the anthropologist's over the native. To the extent that we ignore people's understandings of the anthropologist or of one another, we prevent inquiry being truly dialogic or metaphysically radical.

The motion then is partly a statement of emerging fact. Cultural studies already pervades the work of many innovative and thoughtful anthropologists. The motion also implies such a shift is desirable. The widespread interest in cultural studies suggests it addresses issues that anthropology has failed to.

By cultural studies, I mean in particular the legacy of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham.

<sup>32</sup> P.E. Willis, *Learning to labour: how working class kids get working class jobs*, Aldershot, Gower, 1977.

<sup>33</sup> M. Hobart, "As I lay laughing, encountering global knowledge in Bali", in *Counterworks: managing the diversity of knowledge*, (ed.) R. Fardon, ASA Decennial Series, London, Routledge, 1995.

<sup>34</sup> I deliberately do not distinguish ethnography, the description of peoples, from fieldwork, because ethnography is a series of overlapping practices. I prefer therefore to think of ethnography-as-fieldwork, -as-writing, etc. See M. Hobart, "Ethnography as a practice, or the unimportance of penguins", *Europeana*, 2(1), 3-36, 1996. Also, for my adaptation of Laclau on dislocation, see E. Laclau, "New reflections on the revolution of our time", in his *New reflections on the revolution of our time*, London, Verso, 1990.

According to its doyen, Stuart Hall, it never set out to be a single school, but rather a series of overlapping debates around public, and mass, culture ruptured by issues of feminism and race.<sup>35</sup> Confronting the implication of power and knowledge required continually rethinking the object of cultural studies.<sup>36</sup> Anthropology by-passes awkward issues, such as those raised by race and feminism by hypostatizing them into objects of study (ethnicity, gender), at once ghettoising them and defusing questions of who does the knowing, about whom and under what conditions.<sup>37</sup>

Addressing such questions head-on avoids the pretence of epistemological and political neutrality, a hypocrisy which besets most disciplines of anthropology's generation. In a manner eerily reminiscent of Britain's lingering Tory imperial fantasies, anthropologists have overwhelmingly refused seriously to address the existence of the continent, here theoretical thinking from Bakhtin/Volosinov or Gramsci, to the Frankfurt Critical School or post-Heideggerian hermeneutics, to post-structuralism, postmodernism, contemporary psychoanalysis and critical feminist thinking. By contrast, cultural studies seized the opportunity to contribute significantly to the main intellectual debates of the last decades. I am not advocating the loonier shores of postmodernism. But most anthropologists proudly parade their stigmata of theoretical abstention, or plain ignorance. Stuart Hall, admittedly *a parti pris*, reflected that cultural studies had attracted attention 'not just because of its sometimes dazzling internal theoretical development, but because it holds theoretical and political

<sup>35</sup> L. Grossberg, "On postmodernism and articulation: an interview with Stuart Hall", in *Stuart Hall: critical dialogues in cultural studies*, (eds) D. Morley and K.-H. Chen, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 149.

<sup>36</sup> S. Hall, "Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies", in *Stuart Hall: critical dialogues in cultural studies*, op. cit., pp. 268-69.

<sup>37</sup> On whether this constitutes a form of inferential racism, see S. Hall, "The whites of their eyes: racist ideologies and the media", in *The media reader*, (eds) M. Alvarado and J. O. Thompson, London, British Film Institute, 1990. It certainly naturalises uncritical intellectual elitism and trivialises the more radical feminist critiques, see H. L. Moore, *Feminism and anthropology*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988; G. Lloyd, *The man of reason: 'male' and 'female' in western philosophy*, 2nd. edn., London, Routledge, 1993.

questions in an ever irresolvable but permanent tension ... without insisting upon some final theoretical closure'<sup>38</sup>

Cultural studies threatens to broaden and reinvigorate anthropology. Unless it is window-dressing, the transformation will effectively toll the death of the old anthropology and the emergence of new kinds of intellectual practices which, a better expression not coming to mind, I shall call comparative cultural studies.<sup>39</sup>

This new improved cultural studies has to answer two charges among others. Attempts to avoid codification have given rise to the complaint: what is cultural studies actually about? It can become thought about thought without an object, where interpretation substitutes for intensive fieldwork and textuality for interlocutors.<sup>40</sup> Cultural studies has proven sensitive to intellectual

<sup>38</sup> S. Hall, "Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies", in *Stuart Hall: critical dialogues in cultural studies*, (eds) D. Morley and K.-H. Chen, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 272.

<sup>39</sup> Scholars such as Johannes Fabian, the late Bob Scholte and, rather differently, Rodney Needham have elaborated the philosophical implications of anthropology which the former two have referred to as 'critical anthropology'. I am much indebted to their work, but prefer to avoid the expression critical anthropology here because 'critique' and 'critical' have come to be used very loosely and cover a multitude of sins. In Fabian's and Scholte's sense, I think critical anthropology would make an excellent interlocutor with cultural studies. See J. Fabian, *Time and the other: how anthropology makes its object*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983; J. Fabian, "Dilemmas of critical anthropology", in *Constructing knowledge: authority and critique in social science*, (eds) L. Nencel and P. Pels, London, Sage, 1991; B. Scholte, "Towards a critical and reflexive anthropology", in *Reinventing anthropology*, (ed.) D. Hymes, New York, Vintage, 1974; B. Scholte, "Critical anthropology since its reinvention: on the convergence between the concept of paradigm, the rationality of debate and critical anthropology", *Anthropological and Humanist Quarterly* 3(1-2), 4-17, 1978; R. Needham, "Skulls and causality", *Man* 11(1), 71-88, 1976; R. Needham, "Inner states as universals: sceptical reflections on human nature", in *Indigenous psychologies*, (eds) P. Heelas and A. Lock, London, Academic Press, 1981.

<sup>40</sup> This tendency is epitomised in much American cultural studies, see L. Grossberg, "On postmodernism and articulation: an interview with Stuart Hall" and S. Hall, "Cultural studies and its theoretical legacies", both in *Stuart Hall: critical dialogues in cultural studies*, (eds) D. Morley and K.-H. Chen, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 149-50, 273-74.

elitism. However such cultural populism runs into a dilemma.<sup>41</sup> The possibility of the popular and the masses being objects of study presupposes distinguishing a class of intellectuals who do the studying. What theory claims to overcome, the consequences of practice may reinforce.

When we turn to anthropological concerns the difficulties become grave. Analyses of postcolonial writing narrowly reflect the concerns of Euro-American intellectuals and effectively ignore those of their subjects of study. The problem for comparative cultural studies is that the more sophisticated their theoretical practices become, the greater their potential analytical disparity with, and distance from, their subjects' practices. English especially grows into an ever-stronger enunciative language of translation and interpretation.<sup>42</sup> The masses, whether conceived as energetic and creative, or silent, passive and alienated, or ironic and antagonistic, remain curiously elusive.<sup>43</sup> And a familiar displacement occurs onto products (collective representations, texts, consumption, popular culture) and away from others' intellectual and critical practices, as if these did not exist.

Eurocentrism lurks. The assumption underpinning cultural studies of a shared culture (which was always rather cosy) no longer holds. How is the analyst to engage with presuppositions which may be radically different, let alone with others' critical thinking? While anthropologists are experienced in addressing the former, they still have difficulties with the latter.

<sup>41</sup> J. McGuigan, *Cultural populism*, London, Routledge, 1992; cf. A. Gramsci, "The study of philosophy", in *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, (eds and trans) Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1971, p. 334.

<sup>42</sup> M. Foucault, *The archaeology of knowledge*, (trans.) A.M. Sheridan, London, Tavistock, 1972, pp. 88-105; T. Asad, "The concept of cultural translation in British social anthropology", in *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*, (eds) J. Clifford and G. Marcus, London, California University Press, 1986.

<sup>43</sup> See J. Baudrillard, *In the shadow of the silent majorities ... or the end of the social and other essays*, (trans) P. Foss, P. Patton and J. Johnston, New York, Schocken, 1985; J. Baudrillard, "The masses: the implosion of the social in the media", in *Jean Baudrillard, selected writings*, (ed.) M. Poster, (trans.) M. Abelclem, Oxford, Polity, 1988.

There is not much point in asking you to vote for comparative cultural studies, if it is just a guise for a new form of epistemological domination. Between cultural studies and anthropology however there are elements of a way out. People are, of course, engaged in all sorts of intellectual practices. This I take to be Gramsci's point that 'all men are intellectuals ... but not all men in society necessarily have the function of intellectuals'.<sup>44</sup> Because the peoples with whom anthropologists classically work mostly live under unpleasant régimes bent on stifling original and critical thinking does not mean that people do engage in such thinking. We must rework our intellectual practices to appreciate and engage with those of others, but such that issues of power are continually addressed. The imbrication of power in knowledge is a dilemma we have to face.

The practices of such a study would presumably stress the dialogic, a term which urgently requires rethinking. A telling index of anthropologists' capacity for hierarchy is the way dialogue is recognised only for fieldwork,<sup>45</sup> rather than being the start of the scholar's long engagement with her subject, assuming whatever forms are appropriate under the circumstances.<sup>46</sup>

To conclude, the measure of our commitment to a truly post-colonial world is whether we are prepared to engage with different, and potentially antagonistic, intellectual practices. The results are certain to be unsettling, because it requires questioning our claims to epistemological superiority. The other side may well argue that critical anthropology has addressed these deficiencies. Critique since Kant however often has imperialising consequences. On this score, as the dominance of Europe, and even America, is challenged by other centres of power such as Pacific Asia, reverse colonialism is setting in, together with a new paternalistic,

<sup>44</sup> A. Gramsci, "The intellectuals", in *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, (eds and trans) Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1979, p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, J. Clifford and G. Marcus (eds), *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986.

<sup>46</sup> For example, although censorship of Indonesia's New Order régime prevents many issues being broached openly, it has not entirely inhibited lively public discussion. I have recently been engaged in two newspaper debates about the relationship of culture and mass media in Indonesia.

authoritarian ideology. Self-interest alone should make a less imperialising comparative cultural studies congenial. Anyone heavily invested in anthropology as it is and who regards cultural studies as a distraction from business as usual may wish to oppose the motion. Conventionally turkeys don't vote for Christmas.

My appeal is to those of you who feel dissatisfied with anthropology as it has become. The alternative, I suggest, is not a solution, but a determination radically to question what we are doing and whether there are not other ways of trying to imagine, and engage ourselves in, the human predicaments of a changing post-colonial world. Whatever emerges would combine elements of the best of anthropological and cultural studies practice, with others yet to be dreamed of (I hope not only by Europeans and Americans). This study however would differ so fundamentally in its presuppositions and practices that to call it anthropology is to risk the familiar slither back into 'normal science'. If you are discontent with anthropology as it is, question the self-satisfaction of much contemporary academia or wish to take issue with our convenient Eurocentrism, I invite you to support the motion.

**Peter Wade:** I'm afraid contributions from the floor now have to end and I will ask the speakers to make any final comments they may have.

**Mark Hobart:** As the opponents of the motion were speaking, I was struck by the extent of their massive idealism, which also ran through a lot of the comments from the audience. Horton once wrote a lovely piece about traditional African medicine and Western science, comparing somebody else's practice with your own ideal.<sup>41</sup> We've just had a wonderful vision of a completely imaginary anthropology. There were moments when I wanted to hear a violin playing, it was so beautiful. We have cultural studies practice. Paul is honest about it and says what all the defects are. Then we get this glowing vision that bears no relation to anything except itself. How do we know that? Because there was no reference to the consequences of what happens in anthropological work. One of the most obvious things is the extent to which surveillance comes in. Johannes Fabian wrote a very nice piece, in which he pointed out the implications of what happens with one's

<sup>41</sup> R. Horton, 'African traditional thought and Western science', *Africa* 37(1), 50-71, 17(2): 155-87, 1967.

writing.<sup>42</sup> We can tell that we're dealing with massive idealism here: nobody's bothered to think these implications through. There is a big gap between the implications of practicing anthropology and intentionality behind it, the latter being a Western obsession—we're back to admitting ourselves. In fact, my re-definition of anthropology now is 'nuanced narcissism', in which we admire our reflections in the rest of the world.

If anthropology were truly dialogic—and by the way I think John may have been on the wrong side, I agreed with much of what he said—then why is this not built into our practices properly, essentially, as fieldwork is. There should then be some kind of formal engagement afterwards. Otherwise, again, it's just pious talk. You should have a five- or ten-year or contract in which you undertake certain kinds of engagement, as the results of your own activity. Then you've got to deal with the mess you help to create.

Clearly, there are good practices and practitioners. But as we were going through today, I was thinking, how many departments of anthropology, in much of their seminar life and other life, would be completely alien to what has been said? Between the four speakers here I suspect there is very little difference as to what constitutes good practice. I'm actually trying to talk about situated practices, not about epistemological ideals.

Is anthropology reprocessed by going via cultural studies? I think part of the answer comes down to a question of definition. The word discipline has been used a great deal here, and it comes, I think, to a problem of two different senses of discipline. We have the old notion of institutionalised disciplines, which comes from a particular metaphor of knowledge: you train a mind. Discipline in this sense always reminds me of boots and leather and all sorts of exciting stuff. I'm thinking of disciplines in a quite different sense, a much more Foucauldian sense of practices in which people discipline themselves and discipline other people. Part of the problem of an African anthropology or African studies, is Foucault's nice point in 'Subject and Power' that in fact one of the

<sup>42</sup> J. Fabian, 'Dilemmas of critical anthropology', in *Constructing Knowledge: authority and critique in social science*, eds L. Nazzari and P. Pels (London, Sage, 1991).

things we do is train people to subjectify and objectify themselves.<sup>83</sup> The fact that anthropologists are going to sit here, turkeys voting energetically, shows this concern with the ideal rather than with actual practices. Paul made nicely the point about intervention. We *are* intervening. This pretence to neutrality is the most dangerous of all things because it re-fortifies a very complex epistemological and political agenda. Again, that has been singularly avoided.

I'm struck by the fact that what you're doing in effect, in rushing to defend anthropology in this way, is voting for a horrendous epistemological asymmetry. It is really metropolitan Europeans and Americans universalising themselves. This is what a university is about. There is no sense of a radical alternative, because if you had an alternative you'd have been coming up with it. This is what anthropology claims that it's doing. I haven't seen it today. In fact I saw, rather sadly, the defense of rather what I expected.

The point of this—I'm going to end with two French thinkers—is that there is a hierarchy here, a kind of verticality, 'us' over 'them'. We coopt brown and black peoples, they become notionally us and carry on the good work. I much prefer Deleuze's image of the rhizome which breaks out of this. You simply can't have Dick's question about how anthropology or cultural studies is going to come out of their encounter. Rhizomic thinking just doesn't work that way.

Another way is Latour's point that we've never been modern, that in fact there are complex networks going on. He got that image from Deleuze anyway. I would argue that if you want to break out of the hierarchical thinking that we have seen beautifully exemplified today, you vote for the motion.

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<sup>83</sup> M. Foucault, 'The subject and power', Afterword to *Michel Foucault: beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*, (eds) H. L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, Brighton: Harvester, 1982.