PART 1—THE PRESENTATIONS

For the motion (1)

MARK HOBART

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 Jeremias 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
Cultural studies will be the death of anthropology

pre-Darwinian assumptions,\(^\text{23}\) and psychology upon a dichotomy of the individual-society, which is vacuous if not circular.\(^\text{19}\) 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 Panglossianism 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 hitherto at the


\(^\text{19}\) The distinction is itself item 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. Henrique et al., Changing the subject: Psychology, social regulation and subjectivity, London, Methuen, 1984, p 12.

nostalgia which makes anthropology heritage studies. 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’.\(^\text{24}\) 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’ (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 voicing with their feet.

Are there 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 procologists of economic development or traditional intellectuals pining *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?

Omnologically, what is the distinctive object of anthropological study or its relationship to our overaching

\(^\text{24}\) See also J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra* (trans. P. Foss, P. Patton and P. Henehan, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983, p 13-23

\(^\text{24}\) The quotations are taken from the editor’s blurb in the Routledge catalogue

\(^\text{24}\) T. Ingold, “Editorial” Man 27(4), 1992, p. 596
Cultural studies will be the death of anthropology

concepts? This forum agreed that 'the concept of society is theoretically obsolete.' Cultural is long in the tooth and incoherently polymorphous, a problem for cultural studies too. As Paterson 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.' Culture, like society, is a particular Euro-American holistic category which has gone off rather badly. 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 transcendant 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


19 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." European 21:1 3-36, 1996. Also, for my adaptation of Latour on dislocation, see E. Latour. "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. Confronting the implication of power and knowledge required continually rethinking the object of cultural studies. Anthropology by-passes awkward issues, such as those raised by race and feminism by hypostasising 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.

Addressing such questions head-on avoids the pretense 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/Valentinov 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 looser shores of postmodernism. But most anthropologists proudly parade their stigmata of postmodernism, contemporay 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 looser shores of postmodernism. Cultural studies will be the death of 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.

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. Cultural studies has proven sensitive to intellectual questions in an ever irresolvable but permanent tension ... without insisting upon some final theoretical closure.

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.


Scholars such as Johannes Fabian, the late Bob Scholle 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 Scholle's sense, I think critical anthropology would make an excellent interlocutor with cultural studies. See J. Fabian, Time and the other: how anthropology indexes its object, New York, Columbia University Press, 1983.


elitism. However such cultural populism runs into a dilemma.\textsuperscript{41}

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 effective 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.\textsuperscript{42} The masses, whether conceived as energetic and creative, or silent, passive and alienated, or ironic and antagonistic, remain curiously elusive.\textsuperscript{43} And a familiar (oral) and in inter relation.\textsuperscript{44} The masses, whether conceived especially grows into an ever-stronger enunciative language of translation and interpretation.\textsuperscript{47} The masses, whether perceived as energetic and creative, or silent, passive and alienated, or ironic and antagonistic, remain curiously elusive.\textsuperscript{46} A familiar (oral) and interrelation.

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.


45 Sec, for example, J. Clifford and G. Marcus (eds), Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986.

46 For example, although censorship of Indonesia's New Order régime prevents much issue 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.
Cultural studies will be the death of anthropology

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.
Cultural studies will be the death of anthropology

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 Hebbert: 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. 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 defectors 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

writing. 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 the reality behind it, the latter being a Western obsession—"we're back to adorning ourselves. In fact, my re-definition of anthropology now is 'nounced 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 it not built into our practices properly, essentially, as fieldwork is? There should be some kind of formal engagement afterwards. Otherwise, again, it's just a 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.

Mark Hebbert: Anthropology reprocessed by going via cultural studies? I think part of the answer comes down to a question of definition. The whole discipline has been used, the power structure, 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 boards and curries 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

things we do is train people to subjectify and objectify themselves. 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 pretense 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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