

Critique of Anthropology

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Critique of Anthropology 2012 32: 59

DOI: 10.1177/0308275X11430873c

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The proposition that ‘the task of anthropology is to invent relations’ has a certain in-built recursivity. Does the motion we are proposing today mean that anthropologists make (invent) new social relations as they engage with people in the field? Or should the motion be understood in the stronger sense – that what anthropologists do amounts to the invention of relations out of non-relational things? As far as I am concerned, the second version is the most interesting of the two. For to say that the task of anthropology is to make the non-relational relational flies in the face of one of the most dogged truisms of our discipline, namely that societies, cultures and human beings come into being through networks of connections. It is therefore this version of today’s motion I shall concentrate on. Yet, before embarking on this task, I wish to note yet a further manner in which one might understand today’s motion. On this understanding, it is the task of anthropology to invent relationality as such. Thus anthropologists do not simply describe relations in their different ethnographic guises. Our task is also to invent the relation itself as a concept, and to keep on doing so until the day comes when it is not worth reinventing it any more. As I shall suggest towards the end of this talk, when I will return to this third and most radical reading of the motion, that day is perhaps not so far away as one might think, or hope.

Relational anthropology. To a Manchester audience like you, my claim that the task of anthropology is to invent relations out of apparently non-relational things may not raise too many eyebrows. After all, this is what key representatives of the relational or ontological turn in anthropology have argued for some time now. Indeed, one of the most important things about the concept of relation in people like Roy Wagner’s and Marilyn Strathern’s work is that it is not subject to what might be called the sociological fetish of connectivity. By this I refer to the assumption shared by many social scientists and western folks that connections are inherently good things. Surely, connections – or, as they are often called synonymously, ‘relations’ – are something that people all over the world strive to create, maintain and celebrate, even if they have diverse ways of doing so, and varying lengths of networks? Thus goes the implicit and normative assumption that is behind the dubious tendency among social scientists to confuse the concept of the relation

with the much narrower concept of the connection, as if the two amounted to the same thing, and belonged to the same level of abstraction.

It is because they offer a sophisticated alternative to this unsatisfactory conceptualization of the relation that certain ethnographical accounts from Melanesia have had such a big theoretical impact within anthropology, STS and cognate fields. Where some students of 'relatedness' and 'social networks' focus on practices that, so to speak, bring the world into ever more proximity with itself by collapsing the distances between persons, or between persons and things, prominent Melanesianists like Strathern, Wagner and my honourable opponent James Leach have instead highlighted practices that trigger latent potentials in persons, things and worlds for their self-differentiation. In this sense, these hugely influential anthropological analytics fall squarely within the terms of the motion we are proposing today. Far from representing a less relational perspective than the imposition of a neo-Durkheimian ideal of perfect connectivity, their study of 'relations that separate' (Strathern, 1988) amounts to a *widening* of the concept of the relation to encompass also those social engagements (such as antagonisms or conflicts), which cannot meaningfully be described as connections, and certainly not in the fetishized sense mentioned above.¹

Crucially, for someone like Strathern, relations do not necessarily serve as vital sociological forms let alone key epistemological concepts for people in Melanesia, say. Rather, the relations described by her and other Melanesianists are necessary inventions (in Wagner's sense) by which Euro-American ethnographers describe their fields. Yet, to echo Casper Bruun Jensen, this does not mean that these so-called Melanesian relations are random constructions. Ethnographic scales and anthropological inventions always come from somewhere concrete (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2009), in the case of 'the relation' from English and more generally Euro-American kinship imaginaries, which, in order to be made into anthropological concepts, had to be conceptually stretched or extended, first by the structural functionalists and later by people like Strathern herself.²

Post-relational anthropology. So far, I have mostly reiterated what has already been said about the concept of the relation by other anthropologists (some of whom are present here today) and why on these grounds the task of anthropology may indeed be defined as the invention of relations. I now want to venture into more unexplored territory by taking up a challenge recently posed by Alberto Corsín-Jiménez (2007), Matei Candea (2010) and myself (2011), namely to ask: what might come after the relation? Are we about to witness a 'post-relational' turn in our discipline, and if so, what might such a post-relational anthropology consist of? As far as I am concerned, it should be made clear from the start that post-relational anthropology, whatever it may turn out be, should not involve an attempt to moderate the radically relational approach spearheaded by people like Roy Wagner, Marilyn Strathern and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. On the contrary, post-relational analysis, for it to contain any theoretical novelty and analytical promise, must involve being *more* relational as opposed to *less* relational – it must involve conducting

anthropological analysis in a 'naïve' hyper-relational as opposed to a 'guarded' semi-relational way (not unlike the real postmodernists, who were not less modernist, but rather more modernist than their modernist predecessors).

Being post-relational, then, is not about rolling back some of the radical elements of the relational approach. Instead, it is about continuing along the relational (or put in more Deleuzian terms) *intensive* path of analysis first laid out by Wagner and then developed by Strathern, Viveiros de Castro and others, and in this process widening the concept of the relation still further, so that it applies to phenomena that are not (yet) part of the relational imagination. One could thus say that the post-relational project is to ethnographically extend 'the relation' as a concept one notch further than the structural functionalists did and some Melanesianists have done, thus automatically (re)inventing it in the process. With these reflections in mind, my aim now is not only to present an argument in defence of the motion tabled today, but also to make a recursive enactment of it. In extending the concept of the relation by asking what comes after it, I hope to literally perform what I take the task of (post-relational) anthropology to be – the invention of relations from seemingly non-relational things.

Reinventing God. I have picked two candidates for my tentative exploration of what happens if we try to push the concept of the relation to its limit by forging new kinds of relations from apparently non-relational things. The two candidates are closely associated; we might even say that they are implicated in each other as each serves as the conceptual ground for the other. I am referring to the Christian God and the (converted) Christian individual. And I hope that simply by naming the two test cases of my post-relational thought experiment, it is evident why they are ideal candidates for it. After all, if there are two ethnographical phenomena that do not at all seem to lend themselves to relational analysis, then they are God and the (converted) Individual. As Joel Robbins (2007) has so forcefully demonstrated, the most common anthropological strategy has been either to ignore the importance of these two phenomena – individuals and God – in the lives of their informants, or to try to show that they are, in fact, something completely and qualitatively different from what they at first sight seem, and or what people themselves imagine them to be. Let me now consider the two in turn.

First, let's try to reinvent God, or more precisely: reinvent the concept of the relation through the concept of God, and vice versa. In fact, Martin Holbraad (2004) has already dealt with this question in a provocative comment on an analysis by Bruno Latour (2004) of Catholic iconography. For Holbraad, 'Christian cosmology poses a challenge' to the Latourian (and more generally relational) principle of symmetry. For, as he asks:

how might this...universe of relations...accommodate the kind of negativity implicit in Christian assumptions about transcendence, *without* falling back into the mysterious antinomies of modernist ontology? How, in other words,

might the Network itself be extended...so as to include its own putative opposite?
(2004)

Time constraints restrict me from presenting Holbraad's answer to this question in detail, and why he considers Latour's own attempt sympathetic but flawed. But even a gloss of his attempt at being 'symmetrical about asymmetry' conveys the relevance of his approach for today's motion. In taking God's transcendence and his insurmountable distance to man seriously (as opposed to Latour, who, according to Holbraad, sees it as yet another modernist black-boxing), Holbraad makes a quintessentially post-relational move: he reinvents 'the network' (aka 'the relation') by extending this concept to denote something that is not a network (and a relation) as we know it. By turning the network into God (as opposed to the other way around), the former is changed from a horizontal chain of self-similar immanent entities into an intensive hierarchy of more or less transcendental beings. Thus the concept of the 'relation' ceases to be what it was before: by inventing a relation out of the non-relational Christian deity, both God and the relation are irreversibly transformed into the distorted and disfigured image of a transversal deity.

Reinventing the individual. Turning now to the concept of the (converted Christian) individual, the basic question I need to ask to invent a relational concept of the individual is therefore not, what must 'the individual' be to be a relation, but rather: what must 'the relation' be in order to be an individual? Let me now have a preliminary stab at this question by reflecting on my recent work on Christian conversion in the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar. While most Mongolians will classify themselves as Buddhist or shamanists, the number of Christian converts has been increasing rapidly since 1990, in particular in the cities, especially among younger, educated women. Consider the case of Undraa. The oldest, unmarried daughter in a large household, she has had more than her share of problems with drunken and jobless men, who constantly made new claims on the people around them without seemingly giving anything but trouble and occasionally violence back. Partly in response to that, and partly due to the fact that she is a searching soul (as she put it), Undraa began frequenting one of the many new (mostly Protestant) churches that have been opened in Ulaanbaatar since 1990. Eventually, she converted, and shortly after she opened a translation bureau, which since developed into a decent business. In what was hardly a coincidence, this double shift to a new religious and a new class status was accompanied by a significantly hardened rhetoric in response to the claims made on her by different men ranging from her brothers to potential suitors. For her and many other Ulaanbaatar women subject to similar claims, becoming Christians enables them – by redefining the relations they are supposed to have with others – to exclaim, with equal conviction, 'I do not believe in shamanic spirits' as well as, 'No, I don't want to give you more money for vodka'. As way of cutting connections, such speech-acts allow such women to reduce their obligation to human and nonhuman others by exposing cleavages latent in these connections.

Yet, one could here ask, in post-relational vein: what happens to all the social and spiritual relations severed in the conversion – where does all the cut-off stuff go? I suggest that the site on the missing relations is the inner existential expanse of the Christian individual. For is it not here, in the ‘intra-subjective’ space of guilt, doubt, regret and other introverted acts of moral self-evaluation that all the lost relations re-emerge, only now in a non-social form? We may, it therefore seems to me, reinvent the Christian individual into the assemblage point of an irreversible subsumption of social relations, which takes place alongside the hierarchical encompassment of multiple spirits and demons, which, ideally, results from converting to this religion and becoming faithful to its singular, absolute and transcendental god. While this process has often been described by anthropologists to involve a reduction of relationality, it is, in my view, more ethnographically correct – and thus analytically interesting – to conceive of conversion as a unique relational transformation, or could we say introversion, resulting in qualitatively new kinds of entities, concepts and forms. Christian conversion, then, may be understood as an eclipsing of social relations that keeps ‘the sum of complexity’ (relationality) stable over time, but displaces this complexity from an outer realm we think of as social to an inner realm we think of as existential. What we call the individual is a relational cosmos that has imploded into itself and which has given birth to a new kind of relation, and a new concept of the individual, in the process: what may be called the self-relational person, whose subjectivity or ‘intensionality’ is negatively defined by the unbridgeable distance to the transversal ideal of itself that is the Christian God.

Following from this, it seems to me the ultimate post-relational task can be no other than to rephrase the classic anthropological question of what human being is. Notwithstanding recent enunciations of a ‘post-human turn’ in the social and human sciences, ethnographic cases like Undraa remind us that were not done with the concept of the human yet, far from it. In line with what I said about the concept of the post-relational as being hyper-relational, adopting a post-human stance should not, I believe, involve a devaluation of the concept of the human. On the contrary, the most exiting post-human path may lie in pursuing a post-*humanist* anthropology, which, far from eschewing the question of the human, seeks to intensify the humanist concept of man by continuously distorting it by pushing it towards its limits. The time has come to take on the challenge left by anti-humanists like Lévi-Strauss (1966) and Foucault following their necessary dismantling of the humanist illusion of mankind by attempting to ‘reassemble individual subjects’ (Humphrey, 2008); not to reinstate the liberal fetish of security, choice and freedom crushed with the ‘death of the subject’, but to theorize the multiple forms of human becoming that our ethnographic materials force upon us. To do this, we need, among other things, to forge a new concept of the individual along the lines briefly sketched here, one that is based not on the extensive ontology of connections found in much social theory but on an intensive ontology of ‘post-relations’ that allows for a non-individualist individual, who is not self-identical and intentional but self-relational and intensional.

Conclusion

Deleuze and Guattari famously defined ‘philosophy [as] the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts’ (1994: 2). For the same reason, they further suggested: ‘The philosopher is . . . the potentiality of the concept . . . Concepts are not waiting for us, ready-made, like heavenly bodies. There is no heaven for concepts’ (1994: 5). Paraphrasing this description of the task of philosophy, we could say that the task of anthropologists is to invent relations, and that the task of the ethnographer – together with the people he or she studies – is to be the potentiality of relations, for there is, after all, no heaven of relations either (cf. Meillasoux, 2008). Yet, to continue being potentialities of relations we must keep on (re)inventing our relations by extending them to encompass apparently non-relational things such as the Christian God and the converted human believer.

But this elicits a final question. For we need to ask ourselves whether anthropologists, once the post-relational task is accomplished – assuming that this is ever going to happen – will be compelled to do away with relations as the basic unit of anthropological analysis. For it seems to me that when or if the day comes when everything has been – at least or potentially could be – accounted for in intensive, post-relational terms, we have also reached the point when we should put ‘the relation’ to rest and leave it behind us. Not, crucially, because we will be in a position from which we can revert to a pre-relational world comprised by autonomous beings and things distributed in extensive space, but because the sheer amount and the diversity of relations to be found in a given context will be so vast that it will be futile to focus on – or even mention – them any more.

To sum up, I am proposing that the task of anthropology has always been to invent relations, including the concept of the relation itself. As a measure of respect for this particular tradition of invention, I am further suggesting that the task of a future post-relational anthropology is to keep on reinventing ‘the relation’ by asking what comes after it and, as part of this process, do away with the concept. This may sound like an oddly self-defeating point with which to end my case for today’s motion, but I consider it to be a necessary corollary of the theoretical stance it is my duty to defend. By continually reinventing the relation, anthropology must eventually come to obviate this concept by making the intensive basis of social life so conventional that it needs no further mention.

Notes

1. At the same time as they are widening ‘the relation’, Strathern, Wagner and others may also be said to narrow it down by removing its associations with the Euro-American folk-theory of the connection.
2. It may be inferred that the widening of the concept of the relation was already introduced by Radcliffe-Brown, whose work on joking and avoidance relationships in retrospect

represented a sophisticated attempt to study the connections and disconnections that social relations simultaneously afford (Willerslev and Pedersen, 2010). However, one should not lose sight of the fact that the 'social relations' described by the structural-functionalists belong to a different kettle of fish than those described by certain Melanesianists. To use a distinction invoked by Casper Bruun Jensen, whereas for people like Radcliffe-Brown 'social structure' consists of 'external relations' that can be readily observed in the field, then for someone like Marilyn Strathern relations are (also) 'internal', in that they allow for the juxtaposition of different kinds of phenomena and orders of knowledge. As she puts it: '[r]elations are produced through the very activity of understanding when that understanding has to be produced from within, that is, when things in the world can only be compared with other things on the same earthly plane' (1995: 18).

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