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Key Debates in Anthropology

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The Value of Anthropology in the Complex Dynamism of Present-day

This essay will be a critical analysis of the value of anthropological knowledge framed against the dynamism of today's turbulent and rapidly changing world. Questions surrounding the enduring role, function, and relevance of anthropology as a contemporary discipline has been a common theme during the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory (GDAT), and this essay will critically consider several key topic areas that have provoked intense discussion through the GDAT debates surrounding this issue. These particular topics will thus be contextually applied to the case of evaluating the enduring value of anthropological knowledge through critical examination. One such theme that will be explored will be the contention surrounding the issue of advocacy within anthropology, and how this can become problematic in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Another key area that will be investigated involves the value of anthropology as a contemporary faculty of the social sciences, and how the function of anthropology compares against other modern systems of humanitarian studies. This will centre on the theme of the 1996 GDAT debate, which proposes that cultural studies, as a modernised academic paradigm, will be the death of anthropology. Exploring this theme will lead neatly on to the final avenue for investigation, bringing this inquiry to the present day. Here, the topic of the 2012 GDAT debate regarding the concept of neoliberalism as an obstacle to anthropology's understanding of the current global environment. This will lead this analysis back to the role of the 21st century anthropologist, and the ability of anthropology to deal with the inherent political nature of today's globalised world.

Before beginning this investigation into the value of anthropological knowledge in today's rapidly changing world, it is first worth unpacking how the 'value' of anthropological knowledge can be contextualised. Perhaps the best way that this can be interpreted is in terms of the 'relevance' of anthropology in the contemporary environment it now finds itself. Is contemporary anthropology still a useful tool in understanding humanity? Has its role changed from that of a passive accumulator of knowledge, into a more engaged representation of humanity? Perhaps answering these questions with any absolutism lies outside the scope of this single essay, however, contextualising these queries does offer a deeper insight into the issues facing contemporary anthropology in today's world. This essay will critically investigate this 'value' of anthropology, through the application and exploration of debates between anthropologists themselves, and the ethnographies that have also been produced regarding these very themes. The fundamental aim then, will not be to present a definitive measure of the 'value' of anthropological knowledge, but rather to offer a greater understanding of the application, utilisation, and 'usefulness' of anthropological knowledge in the contemporary global environment.

To begin then, it is perhaps a fitting place to start by analysing the well trodden case of advocacy in anthropology. The issues presented by anthropological advocacy serve as a nice introduction into analysing the value that anthropological knowledge has in today's increasingly dynamic and complex world. There has long been contention surrounding fundamental questions regarding the 'role' of anthropology, with these being exacerbated through the internal advocacy debate. Advocacy is a recognised and important part of anthropology, existing as a process that both naturally develops through an anthropologists involvement with communities and groups, and as a 'service' of the

anthropologist, whom at request can serve as a representative in a variety of situations for different individuals, groups, or organisations. However, this raises fundamental problems regarding the 'responsibilities' of an anthropologist in this regard, and produces inconsistencies between the function of anthropology itself, and the role of that of an advocate. This very issue was the subject of the 1995 GDAT debate, which addressed the motion '*Advocacy is a personal commitment for anthropologists, not an institutional imperative for anthropology*' (GDAT, 1995). This particular concern is intensified by the current turbulent global climate, and this investigation will now explore this in detail in order to begin to contextualise the value of anthropological knowledge in today's world.

Introducing the motion for consideration in the 1995 GDAT debate, Peter Wade acknowledges that the stimulus for the discussion regarding advocacy centres on the troublesome principal that anthropology is a process that is embedded within, rather than detached from, the humanity it seeks to understand. Here Wade (1995) suggests that problem lies in the differences between the pursuit of academic anthropology and *engaged* anthropology. The process of engaged anthropological advocacy is an inherently reflexive process, and as one would expect, becomes problematic in the face of issues that arise from the division and subsequent endorsement of a particular set of interests and concerns (Wade, P. 1995. pp4-8). Regardless of intentions that centre on equality and fairness, advocacy by its very nature, is about endorsing a certain position over that of another. How and who gets represented, and also the manner in which the representation is presented as 'the truth' as a reflection of 'expert knowledge', is a matter of concern. Here lies the problem for Anthropology, and one that appears to produce a dualism regarding its resolution. As is evident in the GDAT debate, there are two distinct

arguments. First, that there is a moral obligation for advocacy; and second, that at the fundamental level, advocacy and the method of anthropology are incompatible due to irreconcilable inconsistencies in ethos. If anthropology is about the representation of all humanities nuanced diversity, then surely the function of the advocate contradicts this, as only one viewpoint is thus endorsed and ultimately represented. Again, this is the 'problem' of the role of anthropology. Is anthropology the pursuit of objective documentation and comprehension of humanity, or should it be *more*? Advocacy through anthropology is problematic here, because it seems to introduce an inherent contradiction through a crisis of philosophy.

Chris Fuller (1995) raises two concerns regarding this topic. Firstly, that advocacy must be bound to moral equality, with advocacy assisting the oppressed rather than the oppressors. This places a lot of faith and reliance on the 'expertise' of the anthropologist to correctly atone the balance of power. However, who is the oppressor and who is the oppressed in any given situation is not always clear. Fuller exemplifies this point through citing Hastrup & Elsass (1990), who suggest that in these situations it is easy to fall victim to stereotypes of 'goodies and baddies'. The second problem for Fuller (1995) is that of unintended consequences. Through 'successful' advocacy and the redressing of power, an oppressed group may thus become the oppressor as the nuanced balance of power has been altered. Additionally, unintended consequences may in fact occur far away, as any alteration to delicate power dynamics can have compounding and unpredictable far reaching effects (Fuller, S. 1995. pp6-10). However, Robert Layton and Michael Rowlands (1995) both make similar pleas in favour of advocacy in anthropology, arguing that the foundations of anthropology have a commitment to advocacy, particularly to those

communities engaged in act of anthropology itself (Rowlands, M. 1995. pp21-28).

Anthropology has a duty to represent those that appear through its ethnographies, with Layton stating that the act of representation through ethnography, is in fact, advocacy in and of itself (Layton, R. 1995. pp11-17). Adding his support to the case of advocacy in anthropology, Stuart Kirsch (2002) suggests that maintaining neutrality whilst engaging in anthropology in certain cases may not, morally speaking, be possible, as structural inequalities and extreme power biases make it far easier for corporations to take advantage of indigenous populations through lobbying and exploitative practices. This is particularly apparent through the complexity and ever invasive nature of the current global capitalist environment. Through his own experiences of conducting ethnographic research which exposed him to the inequalities and exploitation surrounding the O k Tedi mine in Papua New Guinea, Kirsch felt a compelling responsibility towards the community with which he was involved and raised questions regarding the proprietary responsibilities of anthropologists towards the research that they conduct (Kirsch, S. pp175-193).

Bringing this exploration into advocacy and anthropology into a contemporary context, Peter Kellett (2009) reflects on the relevance of this particular debate for the future of the discipline. Kellett poses the same familiar questions: "What is anthropology for? Who is it for? Why should anthropologists strive for objectivity?", and suggests that these stem from 'unresolved tensions' inherent to the development of the discipline. Kellett goes on to claim that from the very beginning, anthropology, as the 'child of colonialism', has always been engaged directly or indirectly, and that the unequal power dynamics of European colonialism are echoed today through the enduring injustices and inequalities which appear through unbridled capitalism; between the north and south, rich and poor, powerful

and powerless. Essentially, Kellett suggests that given the current global environment, anthropology finds itself in a position whereby it can be a positive mechanism of brokering power dynamics and enacting moral change. Anthropologists should embrace their capacity as agents of change, especially at a time where huge inequalities are rampant throughout humanity (Kellett 2009, pp22-29). To quote Kellett:

"There is little doubt that the lives of many people in the world are in desperate need of improvement and as anthropologists I believe we have a responsibility to support them.

Concern for their condition is not sufficient." (Kellett 2009, p29)

Another avenue to investigate the current and future value of anthropological knowledge, is through exploring the topic for discussion in the 1996 GDAT debate entitled: *"Cultural Studies will be the Death of Anthropology"*. This provocative title proceeds a discussion that centres on anthropology's enduring position within the social sciences. The debate centres on the 'threat' posed toward anthropology as a discipline through the rising popularity of the multi-disciplinary cultural studies as an 'emergent paradigm'. Although focussed on the increasing popularity of cultural studies in the 1990's, and perhaps reading as a little dated through the whiff of postmodernist miasma that lurks within the discourse, the debate does serve to highlight broader questions of relevance facing anthropology as a contemporary scholastic endeavour. Evidently, as John Gledhill (1996) explains, worries over the future of anthropology are nothing new, with Bronislaw Malinowski himself being troubled by the 'demise of the primitive', and the possibility of anthropology running out of road, so to speak (Gledhill 1996, p38). Mark Hobart (1996) takes this sentiment a step further, with the rather radical suggestion that anthropology is

in fact already dead, having exhausted its episteme and having 'had its day'. Hobart continues by stating that the world is entirely different from the time of anthropology's heyday as a movement, with anthropology historically being a member of a distinct intellectual and political period of European history, and perhaps lingered there a little too long. Subsequently, anthropology is 'ill suited' to an increasingly post-disciplinary world, of which cultural studies offers a contemporary alternative. To quote Hobart:

"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" (Hobart 1996, p11).

Although on the surface, Hobart's approach is particularly caustic, fundamentally it does epitomise general thematic concerns about the future of the discipline. Hobart continues by suggesting that the anthropological method and agenda now finds itself assimilated into the workings of the wider human sciences. Citing Henrietta Moore on the matter to punctuate this point, 'anthropology is no longer a singular discipline, but rather a blend of practices engaged in a wide variety of social contexts' (Hobart 1996, p12). Here though, instead of anthropological diversification, Hobart points to there no longer being a concrete discipline to guard and thus relevance to validate. Furthermore, the task of anthropology from within the human sciences was to explore the pre-modern peoples and, excuse the crass terminology, 'the primitive'. As the proverbial 'end of the road' looms, the original rationale for anthropology disappears along with it, leaving the discipline with an existential crisis (Hobart 1996, pp11-15). Hobart brings his rationale to an end by asserting that if cultural studies has proven sensitive to intellectual elitism, then anthropology is just as

guilty of ethnographic elitism, with this becoming problematic for the future of the discipline. Hobart thus claims that the future of anthropology lies in its level of willingness to engage in broader and more divergent intellectual practices, and the uncomfortable task of re-assessing its claims to epistemological superiority and the fetishisation of sacrosanct ethnographic fieldwork (Hobart 1996, pp18-19). This sentiment is also shared later in the GDAT debate by Paul Willis (1996), who also criticises the reverence of 'the field' and the authoritative clout that this appears to impart. After all, for Willis, anthropologists are certainly not the only researchers within the humanities who conduct fieldwork, yet in anthropology the pedestal upon which it is placed appears mighty high indeed. Willis cites a potential difference in the approach here between anthropology and wider cultural studies; that anthropology is too bounded to the notion of 'the field', as a professional 'rite of passage' (Willis 1996, pp32-34). Quoting Willis:

"I remember Jean Lave coming to Wolverhampton last year, and saying that if you didn't have eighteen months in the field, and she definitely meant a long way away from where you normally lived, then you had no chance of beginning to present an ethnographic case or argument". (Willis 1996, p34)

By no means are Hobart's and Willis' judgements on the relevance and future of anthropology without rebuttal. Far from it. In many cases the diversification of the anthropological gaze is taking place, evident in the different subcategories that have now internally appeared within anthropology itself. Nigel Rapport (1996) demonstrates that since the 1980's, anthropology has been augmenting its traditional endeavours and has established a competency in the very same 'Western' areas that cultural studies is

invested, from which it has classically abstained (Rapport 1996, pp20-23). Indeed, Rapport sees anthropology as existing as more than the sum of its parts, insisting that anthropology is an attitude, an awareness; a process and not an identifiable singular curriculum. It is indeed multifaceted, being cultural, visual, psychological, historical, symbolical, ecological, biological, and evolutionary. Anthropology is diverse through its own nature, covering contexts ranging from witchcraft in Africa, to the plight of the farmer in rural England (Rapport 1996, p25-26). John Gledhill remains just as positive about the future of anthropology as Rapport, affirming that it is through the strength of anthropological ethnography and the relationships this creates that will see anthropology remain relevant, useful, and endure long into the future. That is not to ignore anthropology's duty to redress some of its more cherished assumptions and what Gledhill sees as perhaps more 'privileged' notions of cultural knowledge (Gledhill 1996, p42). Nevertheless, the real testament for Gledhill, is through what he sees as the unique method of anthropological ethnography; the inherent nature of being intimately engaged in fieldwork, the critical re-evaluation of past knowledge and present conceptualisations. This is real power behind anthropology, and what will uphold its position as an authentic and ongoing noble endeavour (Gledhill 1996, pp38-44).

To bring this investigation towards its conclusion, and steer the inquest firmly in the direction of anthropological knowledge in the 21st Century, the last topic to be explored will be the subject of the 2012 GDAT debate entitled: *"The Concept of Neoliberalism has Become an Obstacle to the Understanding of the Twenty-First Century"* (JRAI, 2015). Introduced by Soumhya Venkatesan (2012), the motion came about through the increasing prevalence of 'neoliberal' and 'neoliberalist' terminology that appeared in anthropological

ethnographies and published works in recent years. This reintroduced familiar questions regarding the role and capacity of anthropological knowledge, all be it within the politically charged nature of the contemporary global environment. Indeed, 'neoliberal' is an inherently political term, and, to prevent a decent into an entirely new inquiry, generally speaking refers to principals that favour free market capitalism, expansion of the private sector, and retreat of the state. The issues here, regard the haphazard use and application of this ambiguous terminology from within anthropology, and the wider political commitment of the discipline, which classically, has been hesitant to engage with such generalising and perhaps vague notions as 'neoliberalism' (Venkatesan 2015, p911). This raises interesting questions regarding the ability of anthropology to be able to engage with and tackle some of the more generalising themes that are popularised through the current global political climate.

Evidently, James Laidlaw (2015) finds anthropology's engagement with 'neoliberalism' deeply problematic, suggesting the terminology is sufficiently loose and 'baggy' it loses much of its meaning and, in fact, its application sullies the delicacy and proficiency of comprehensive anthropological investigation. Here, using neoliberalism in an explanatory capacity is to arguably gloss over the *real* issues that are buried within. If one expects neoliberalism to be the problem, then in ethnographic terms, the investigation is not delving deep enough into any given situation to truly appreciate all the nuances unique to those particular circumstances. For Laidlaw, if *we already know* the answer, then there is little reason to actually *inquire* (Laidlaw 2015, pp912-914). Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2015) takes a rather different approach to anthropology's engagement with neoliberalism. Eriksen sees neoliberalism as an ideology, one that has crept in from ingrained capitalist

dogma, and is a consequence of globalising capitalist forces. Neoliberalism ideologically guides not only market forces, political institutions and NGOs, but importantly a particular notion of personhood. Here, the 'responsible, bounded, autonomous, maximising *individual*' is endorsed through neoliberalism, and as expected, is thus inherently politically engaged with the globalising climate. What Eriksen is suggesting is that anthropology must re-conceptualise this notion of the *individual* that accompanies neoliberalism. To quote Eriksen:

"In order to understand the tensions surrounding contemporary personhood across the world, and to connect them to broader economic and political processes, we need the concept of neoliberalism. It mediates between the person and the system, the formal and the informal, the community and transnationally connected world society" (Eriksen 2015, p917).

Eriksen continues by making the argument that it would be hard indeed to come across a economic process, political practice, or social movement anywhere that doesn't relate to neoliberal processes, and to attribute these effects merely to 'capitalism' is not sufficient. Neoliberalism has imparted a new form of identity politics, where neoliberalist doctrine has seen identity become commercialised, goal-orientated, and individualised. This happening as part of a wider reflexive process, reflecting the nature of the global capitalism. Eriksen's acknowledgement of individualism in this respect is similar to Ulrich Beck's notions of the 'individualisation process' through the reflexive modernisation paradigm. Beck makes similar analogies here, suggesting that individualisation is a process bound to globalising capitalist forces, and as such, the individual is subject to a set of entitlements and

obligations at the behest of the dominant economic ideology (Beck 1995, pp7-8). Eriksen finishes by stating that if anthropology fails to acknowledge these new social arrangements dictated by marketisation and creeping capitalism, it is also failing the very people and communities it is involved with (Eriksen 2015, pp914-917).

The very fact that anthropology is willing to address and debate these issues shows that it still useful and valuable tool in the continued engagement and understanding of humanity in today's changing world. Even if the discipline as a whole cannot entirely agree on particular concepts, and even with the presence of divisions within the discipline, the fact that Anthropology is partaking in internal self-critical analysis and debate, and importantly, *acknowledging* diverse and complex issues, shows that it has a proactive and passionate analytical approach to engaging with humanity. In the first case, the discussion brought forward through advocacy demonstrates that anthropology has matured as a discipline, has acknowledged its past and is looking toward the future and how it can continue to be of use and benefit to humanity in a variety of different applications. The exploration of the 1996 GDAT debate highlights how anthropology is still relevant in the face of new and emergent social sciences, holding its own against its contemporary counterparts and demonstrating a proven adaptability through new diverging branches of study. Finally, exploring the debate into neoliberalism and current global trends, anthropology's recognition of the problems this presents illustrates its commitment to development and progress. Again, even though opinions remain divided on the subject, the fact that the discipline is taking these issues seriously proves that anthropological knowledge is more than qualified to impart its valuable insight and assistance in today's rapidly changing world.

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