

Key Debates in Anthropology

Using key themes from at least 3 GDAT debates, critically consider the value of Anthropological knowledge in today's rapidly changing world

Change is experienced in every society in the world, and is a common aspect of human life (Ali, 2009: 16). Just like societies, academic disciplines also go through significant changes as a result of shifting ideologies.

Anthropology is no different. Founded during the Enlightenment period, anthropology as a discipline has often been labelled as the 'bastard child of colonialism'. Its initial professional focus was on non-Western peoples and 'primitive cultures' for the purposes of scientific colonisation (Shahrani, 2017). Today, anthropology is emerging out of the 'self-doubt' which attacked it during the postcolonial era (Pina-Cabral, 2006). However, by immersing itself deeply in its departmental politics, Pina-Cabral (2006) state that anthropology had failed to confront actual issues and as a result, jeopardised its disciplinary future. Consequently, many questions arose about the very nature of anthropology as an academic discipline. What is anthropology in today's world? What do anthropologists actually do? Is it still relevant?

Naturally, many anthropologists were concerned about the doubts about the relevance of anthropology. Ingold (1994: 13) highlighted his worries about anthropology as the 'questioning nature of the nature and objectives of anthropological inquiry gained an added urgency'; it was becoming more and more fragmented which in turn meant that it had less to contribute to other disciplines; it starved of new ideas; the widening gap

between anthropology as it was practised and how it was taught in universities - in other words, how it was publicly presented. To address these problems and to acknowledge contemporary issues by being in the 'forefront of public and academic debate', he established the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory (GDAT) in 1994. This created a platform for anthropologists and academics of other disciplines to propose motions and debate which contributes to understanding the value of anthropological knowledge.

To understand the present issues of anthropology as an academic discipline, its history must be taken into consideration. In the 18th century, anthropology was primarily the study of 'tribes' in a colonial world where anthropologists were driven by the need to create a role for themselves (Rowlands, 1996: 22) by writing about the exotic other. By the 1960s, it was established as an academic discipline and started addressing the postcolonial issues. It claimed for itself a 'competency not only in those areas of traditional provenance in the Third World and abroad, but in those very centres of Western power and population' (Rapport: 1997: 23). Moreover, in the development of its methodology, it progressed from armchair anthropology to fieldwork becoming the basis of anthropological research. When Malinowski developed participant observation as a research method (Bernard, 2006: 344), it revolutionised anthropology, and this methodology has been praised as a significant strength of anthropology. Ingold (1994: 1) suggested that it gave anthropologists a privilege of knowledge and skills to understand the course of people's practical involvements with one another and with their environments in their everyday lives. Therefore, he states that today 'anthropology is at

once the most resolutely academic and most fiercely anti-academic of disciplines (1994: 1).

In 2006, France's National Centre for Scientific Research was considering removing anthropology from its disciplinary list (Pina-Cabral, 2006). This questions the nature of anthropology as a discipline: is it a science? Ingold states that this question is as old as anthropology itself (1994: 15). The 1988 GDAT 'Social anthropology is a generalising science or it is nothing' which was the very first debate, focused on this question. Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 189) stated that the methods used in anthropology were similar to those used in physical and biological sciences, therefore, there is a place within natural sciences for the study of society. Arguing for the motion, Keith Hart state that anthropology as an academic discipline must be part of science. He suggests that if it does not, it will soon go into the 'pseudo-sciences' dustbin along with sociology and other such disciplines which failed to move on with their times (1994: 22). Agreeing with him, Anthony Good (1994: 27-29) suggests how anthropology has the potential to be scientific. He argues that if methodologies such as ethnography is only reflexive, and for it to be taken seriously as grounded research, anthropologists need to regard the activities as scientific (1994: 30).

Opposing the notion, Anthony Cohen (1994: 23) defends the role of ethnographic observation in anthropology, stating how it is more than just reflexive writing. He demonstrates how anthropology is concerned with complication, complexity and differences. Moreover, Judith Okely explains the consequences of labelling anthropology as a science as it limits its potential (1994: 33). Perhaps this is because if anthropology were labelled as a science, it will be considered of a lower rank compared to the natural

sciences (Pepper, 1961: 155). She suggests that 'until we can redefine and extend the meaning of science, we should vote for anthropology as knowledge, global and unconfined' (Okely, 1994: 33).

From the 1988 debate, it was evident that when questions arise about the nature of the discipline, it sparks confusion about its purpose. What is anthropology for? What should anthropologists do? The 1995 debate proposes the notion 'Advocacy is a personal commitment for anthropologists, not an institutional imperative for anthropology'. This speakers in the debate argue about the objectives and purpose of anthropology with a focus on advocacy, and how anthropologists should do it. Rowlands (1996: 21) state that advocacy in anthropology is nothing new as it was in the very foundations of anthropology. Advocacy by anthropologists involve them speaking or acting in behalf of the groups they study or represent. Therefore, Fuller (1996: 6) suggests that anthropological advocacy must be based on a premise of moral equality as advocacy will always be on behalf of the oppressed. However, many problems arise as advocacy may have unpredictable outcomes. For instance, it is natural for anthropologists to assume that indigenous people are always the ones being oppressed. Fuller (1996: 7) argues that successful advocacy on behalf of one oppressed group may lead to them exploiting another weaker group which inevitably creates more tension.

So Jane Parish (1996: 17) asks: whose rights do we address and prioritise? She states that advocacy is a contradictory process which works in a market of approval and disapproval, unlike anthropology which is founded on certain moral principles (1996: 17). She highlights the unpredictable outcomes of decision making. But does this mean that anthropologists should not be involved in any decision making if they can

help it? Fuller (1996: 9) in describing his fieldwork in India, explained how he was involved in a strike by landless labourers who were demanding higher wages. Even though he saw numerous situations in which he would usually intervene - had he not been assuming the position as 'the anthropologist' - he did nothing which he justified as doing the right thing because he was the anthropologist. In this case, if anthropology's role was to understand what it means to be human and help the underprivileged, what was he doing? This is the opposite of what Scheper-Hughes would have done, as she states how neutrality is not an option (Kellett, 2009: 26). Instead, she argues that we have a responsibility to be involved and use our ethnography as a tool for critical reflection and for human liberation (Kellett, 2009: 27; Scheper-Hughes, 1995: 417,418).

The significance of participant observation can again be taken into consideration to discuss the practice and application of anthropology. Participant observation is a way of knowing from the inside (Ingold, 2013: 5). Moreover, fieldwork obliges anthropologists to empathise and understand peoples world views. Robert Layton (1996: 11) suggests that as 'professional translators of culture' the anthropologist is placed in a unique position to speak in behalf of the people studied. Therefore, he suggests that anthropology should always be ready to provide advocacy whenever underprivileged groups seek it (Layton, 1996: 13). This debate highlights how there are multiple ways of doing anthropology. However, as Kellett (2009:29) states, 'there is little doubt that the lives of many people in the world are desperately in need of improvement and as anthropologists, I believe that we have a responsibility to support them'. Therefore, an anthropologist's concern is not enough, it must be transformed into action.

When there are doubts about the nature, objectives and the purpose of anthropology, there is concern about the future of the discipline. Anthropology has become interdisciplinary over the years, with many emerging sub-disciplines and related disciplines. However, does this mean the end for anthropology? The 1996 debate proposed the notion 'Cultural studies will be the death of anthropology'. Both anthropology and cultural studies as academic disciplines have been involved in a self-reflexive critique, but the differences lie in the legacies left to them by their histories (Wade, 1997: 4,10). The speakers in the debate proposing the notion argue how anthropology has had its day (Hobart, 1997: 11) and is now dead as cultural studies have replaced it. Mark Hobart (1997: 11) argues how anthropology is predatory by nature and is incompatible in an increasingly post-disciplinary world. He proposed cultural studies as a better alternative which has 'taken culture as the conditions under which social divisions like class, gender and race are naturalised, represented and contested, it voids the worst of transcendent totalising (1997: 14). Agreeing with Hobart that anthropology is dead, Paul Willis (1997: 31) argues how anthropologists travel 'far to the field' which looks traditional and old-fashioned. Moreover, he discusses how anthropology lacks discussing political economy or history, and is troubled by theoretical issues. Ending the debate, he states 'long live TIES: theoretically informed ethnographic study'.

Paul Willis can be taken as the perfect example of someone who has several misconceptions about anthropology. During the debate, Wade dismisses it as 'an old-fashioned, out of date, limited description of anthropology'. Perhaps this issue stems from anthropology's failure to present itself to the public outside of university walls. If academics within the university system think that this is what anthropology still is, who is to

say what those outside of academia think. In this regard, the value of anthropological knowledge is ignored by anthropologists themselves, as it still appears to remain within the walls of academia.

During the debate, those who spoke in favour of anthropology acknowledged the strengths of cultural studies, but dismissed it as being a large exploration of one discourse which deals with cultural grouping (Rapport, 1997: 24). The speakers highlighted how anthropology has changed over the years, but still remained an important and relevant discipline today. Rapport (1997: 23) argues how anthropology is much bigger than just a subject of study, but how it is also an attitude and an awareness. He explains that this is what is meant what it is said that anthropology is the study of humankind; it is aware of its 'social, cultural, symbolical, psychological, cognitive, biological and evolutionary entirety' (1997: 23).

In conclusion, it is evident that anthropology as a discipline has changed over the years. Although its nature, objects and purpose have been questioned, anthropological knowledge is still very much relevant in today's world. With its strengths such as the methodologies of ethnography and participant observation, anthropology has the potential to deal with contemporary issues. In fact, Rapport suggests that anthropology has become 'one of the sexy subjects' (1997: 21) as it deals with things like cyborgs, ecology, nationalism and multiculturalism and violence and community - which are all significant in the contemporary world. Moreover, theory in anthropology is also important, as it is not separate from the social world (Ingold, 1994). Layton (1996: 14) suggests that as anthropologists, we should strive to represent our ethnography through

theories which enable us to fully represent our studies and its impacts.

Ingold's idea to set up GDAT works in favour of all anthropologists around the world as it has created a platform for debating current issues within anthropology - be it theory, practice or purpose and objectives. By reading the debates, problems other than the ones spoken in the debate can be highlighted which could be used for further debate ideas.

In arguing whether anthropology was a generalising science or not, its nature was questioned. Okely's decision not to label anthropology as anything makes sense as it will not limit its full potential. When the nature of anthropology as a discipline was questioned, the purpose and objectives of anthropology become unclear. The debate about advocacy in anthropology helped anthropologists understand that anthropology has multiple ways it can be practiced - perhaps it is a personal preference. However, as Kellett (2009) state, an anthropologist should always be concerned, as without a concern, there is no anthropologist. And finally, the future of anthropology is questioned. Will the rise of other disciplines such as cultural studies mean the end of anthropology? This relates to the fear created when France's research centre wanted to remove anthropology as a discipline. However, many anthropologists such as Pina-Cabral (2006: 663) have argued that anthropology has a 'specific theoretical and methodological legacy that cannot be discarded'. In envisioning anthropology's future, Rapport (1997: 29) state that it will 'promote an awareness of the individuality, the sociality, and the historicity of any one human construction of the world, to encourage an appreciation of the creative human work which inspires such construction and to further an attitude of ironism concerning the absoluteness and finality of any one construction in particular'.

Hobart said that anthropology is already dead. This however, is not true. Anthropology remains an important discipline. In a globalised world especially, anthropology has the power to use its relationships to bridge divides;’ it positions the discipline uniquely able to shape policy and public opinion to foster positive social change’ (Wrapp, 2011). Gledhill (1997: 41) state that we are still a developing discipline, as we are capable of challenging the established world ways. Perhaps in anthropology’s future, anthropological knowledge could be more relevant if it was presented to the public and outside the walls of universities. After all, public presentation and opinion remains important in the value and relevance of something.

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