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The presentations: ‘The task of anthropology is to invent relations’

Proposing the motion: Casper Bruun Jensen

Set-up. An early suggestion was for today’s motion to be ‘relations are always self-evident’. It was eventually given up as too obscure. The motion transformed to: ‘the task of anthropology is to make relations’. The issue with this suggestion was not obscurity but blandness – it seemed somewhat uncontroversial and therefore not too interesting – a testimony to the success of a relational turn of sorts. Thus, came about ‘the task of anthropology is to *invent* relations’. As you will note, the only change is that the word ‘make’ has been replaced with ‘invent’. *Something* of particular interest must then be assumed to relate to precisely that term.

It appears both the tone and implication of the motion have changed quite a bit between the first and last version. The suggestion that relations are always self-evident calls forth perplexed responses for one reason – because it offends what may be called the folk-theory of anthropology, according to which the relations that make up such things as cultures, habits, symbols or kinship systems are largely *unknown*, certainly, precisely, not *self-evident*. In contrast, to the extent that it raises any eyebrows to argue that the task of anthropology is to *invent* relations, one

reason is likely to be that ethnographers do not typically imagine themselves to invent data. They find it, out in the real world, among real people, as I have heard anthropologists vigorously insist many times. In this context, the term 'invention' invokes arrogance or condescension, as if theory and imagination were *enough* to summon other worlds. One thinks of the excesses of rhetoric said to imbue *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Thus invention is seen as the negative opposite of discovery.

Yet this also suggests a certain commonality between the first and last motion: what piques in both cases is that they dispense with the notion that ethnography is a method for discovering relations. The motions do so from two different angles. Since I am thankfully not today required to defend both I shall continue to concentrate on the actual, latter one. However, at the very end I shall have occasion to return to the issue of relational self-evidence and suggest that it is in fact closely related with the invention of relations.

My approach in making the argument is to stay close to the terms of the motion. Thus I should like to now make three sets of brief comments, first on the term 'relations', then on the term 'invention' and finally on the term 'task'.

Relations. First relations, then. The claim that anthropology's key interest is in relations may be seen either as common sense or quite flawed. On the one hand, the relational grounding of anthropology is likely to be seen as common sense by a great many anthropologists, not least (but not exclusively) those who have grown up with linguistic and postmodern turns. Indeed, several entailments of relationality have been articulated in previous debates such as the 2008 one on whether ontology is another word for culture and the 1989 discussion on the obsolescence of society as a theoretical concept (Ingold, 1996: 60–82).

As regards the latter, Marilyn Strathern proposed to replace the analytical construct of society with relations that had no pre-given shape. In her exposition the particularity of social anthropology, however, was due not to an emphasis on relations per se but rather to how 'social anthropologists route connections through persons' (Strathern, 1995, 11). Questions of phrasing aside this suggestion is likely to sound quite sensible to a good many anthropologists; after all, who would argue that people's interactions and the relations they make are *not* focal points of interest? But the relational analytic did not stop at that. It considered the kinds of connections that social anthropologists might attend to. The obvious answer was: multiple kinds. One set comprised diverse 'relations of logic, cause and effect, class and category that people make between things' (1995: 11). Another set of relevant relations seemed to be of a different order, bearing on 'the roles and behavior, through which people connect themselves to one another' (1995: 11).

If the first of these sets would conventionally be designated cultural, the latter could be termed social. It could then be observed that what anthropologists typically do is to gather materials bearing on both sets – cultural and social – while attempting to bring them into analytical relation. Thus, anthropology could be characterized by a *triple* emphasis: 'on relations known to the observer as principles

of social organization and relations observed as interactions between persons' (1995: 12), and on the question of how to align these sets of relations in concrete description and analysis.

Here, I think, we are at the point where relationality may begin to appear flawed. There we were, among real Melanesians, say; now here we are among relations between theories of exchange, gender, kinship and personhood. What has occurred is a change of scale. The broadened focus on relations has enabled a magic trick whereby explanatory devices appear as if *levelled with* what they explain. What began as an interest in the relations people make with each other has moved around; empirically established interpersonal relations become *blended* with analytical constructs. But then, of course, they cease to explain as normally understood; since explanation requires that concepts and theories operate at different level from what they explain. A kind of vertigo may ensue, cognitive dissonance may follow ... as readers of *The Gender of the Gift* (Strathern, 1988) or *From the Enemy's Point of View* (Viveiros de Castro, 1992) may have had occasion to experience. Lest this point be misinterpreted I should add that, from the vantage point of this motion, this dissonance is seen as productive, indeed, precisely, *inventive*.

This is why my choice of the term 'magic' was deliberate. It highlights that divergent perspectives might be taken on what is involved in the relational operation just outlined. Whereas the negative connotations of *conjuring* need not be rehearsed, relationality can also be viewed as performing a different magic. That magic has to do with inventing the world in ways which are interestingly different or surprising, perhaps *alter*.

To whom would it be surprising and different? Both to those who take the reality of the ethnographic encounter so seriously (literalizing experience) that they don't recognize how their analytical presuppositions (for example about society, culture or what have you) are embedded in it, and to those who believe so much in analytical constructs (reifying theory) that they do not attend to how empirical encounters of different times and places are built into them.¹

The distinction between viewing relations as extrinsic or intrinsic is germane here. If relations are extrinsic it means that they connect terms, persons or whatever, that remain unchanged regardless of the connection. If they are intrinsic it means that relations come first, shaping the terms that are purportedly connected. Relational magic arises from viewing *as intrinsic* both the relations normally described as analytical/theoretical and those usually described as empirical, while suspending precisely that common-sense categorization. I should like to argue that this manoeuvre is closely linked to anthropological invention. But what then is invention?

Invention. It is something of a commonplace to argue that anthropologists find relations and make them explicit. Indigenous people live kinship relations, the ethnographer unearths kinship systems. Then, through writing, they make them available to others. The grounding metaphor here is discovery. And one of the

central advantages of ethnography as long-term, in-depth fieldwork is that it facilitates discovery of more relations and relations at deeper levels. It can be problematic to insert into this context the suggestion that relations must be anthropologically invented. Constructivism is often said to embody this problem; as if the anthropologist is free to 'construct' what is in the world. This is, of course, quite a naïve reading, which becomes clearer if one considers that criticisms of constructivism almost always prefaces the term constructed with an implicit 'merely' (Pickering, 1990). A logic is at work here, where the 'merely' constructed stands in opposition to the real. Likewise, with invention: it may signal falseness; it is made up in contrast to what is real.

But the point is different. Relationality makes indistinct what is the conceptual and what is the empirical; where each is found and how they might link. As Viveiros de Castro notes, the point is to 'establish a continuity between the object of description and the description itself' (Viveiros de Castro and Goldman, 2009: 31) – a continuity, an uncertain relation, rather than an adequate representation. There is a link here between description and creativity.

Some years ago 'Description and Creativity' was indeed the title of a conference organized by my esteemed opponent James Leach.² As I understood it, one stake of the conference was precisely how to relieve the term 'description' of the burden of being solely representational and, well, *descriptive*. It suggested that making descriptions requires creativity. Creativity, in turn, involves transformation. It has everything to do with the invention of relations through description.

It may of course be objected that the inventiveness of ethnographic description is inversely correlated with their quality *as descriptions*. That is: the better the descriptions, the less they are invented; the more they are invented, the worse they are as descriptions. We are then returned to the argument concerning the relational basis of anthropology. Moving slightly sideways, however, into science and technology studies (STS) we can also consider the question of what is invention as such. For, if a common-sense understanding of science is that it discovers facts about reality, the re-specification of that idea has been central to science and technology studies.

Donald Mackenzie and Judy Wajcman put the matter thus:

Scientists are, of course, in constant, intimate dialogue with the real, material world, but they are active participants in that dialogue, bringing to it conceptual schema, experimental traditions, intellectual investments, ways of understanding the world, models and metaphors – some drawn from the wider society – and so on. (1985: 6–7)

But if discovery must be rethought so too must its counterpart invention, embodied, for example, in the notion of the 'heroic scientist', who has brilliant flashes of theoretical insight but operates in a social vacuum. Neither discovery, nor invention, as usually understood, can account for the ways in which sciences operate. Creative re-descriptions have been required.

Many examples can be given of sophisticated accounts of the invention of discovery (if you will excuse the phrase). To offer just one, Cori Hayden, in her work on bioprospecting in Mexico, argues that in this case the 'lines between already existing and novel knowledge are fraught with contest, the question of whether and how nature might be understood as itself an innovation has been positively explosive' (2003: 25). Among her scientific interlocutors, their partners and competitors, the question of the relation between discovery and invention was by no means settled. Indeed, Hayden suggested bioprospecting operates *on and with* the 'ever active-lines between invention and discovery, labor and innovation, nature and artifice' (2003: 40). Scientists are involved in 'the dual task of making connections, not just identifying them but [also, simultaneously] forging them' (2003: 215). They, too, 'must establish a continuity between the object of description and the description itself'.

Science studies has thus disposed with the discovery/invention dichotomy, putting in its place a far richer set of contrasts, 'establishing continuity' with the very varied and often nuanced ethno-understandings of scientists themselves. From an STS vantage point it is curious to observe how, meanwhile, social sciences, such as economics, sociology and, yes, anthropology, continue their efforts to mimic science – not, mind you, as ethnographically re-described – but as purveyed through philosophies of science of yesteryear.

This may sound unfair. Yet how else to make sense of the repetitive force with which anthropologists assert that their *special* merit is to ethnographically discover what goes on among real people and the way in which this is contrasted with what is characterized as the high-minded abstractions that bog down other social and humanities research? The trajectories of relations are too complicated for such oppositions; the intermixing of invention and discovery makes them dubious.

Thus, based on the insight that few scientists have ever discovered anything, I draw the conclusion that anthropologists do not do so either. Instead they invent, they tie together multiple threads using multiple resources, in order to creatively re-describe the world. This takes us to the final question, which is obviously of central importance: why should the invention of relations be characterized as the *task* of anthropology?

Task. In my view the idea of the task is more difficult than relations, inventions or their combination. Invention is characterized by surprise and emergence. Invention is an event; it may be mundane yet it has a magical and unpredictable quality of sorts. Because invention is a matter of making new constellations and this is difficult it usually requires motivation and strenuous effort. Nevertheless invention is not guaranteed by intention and it cannot be sanctioned by any method, ethnographic or otherwise. What then can it mean to define as a disciplinary 'task' the invention of relations? One needs to be careful.

Concern with the term 'task' can be strengthened with reference to the initial proposed motion: that relations are always self-evident. The reason why they are always self-evident is that one simply cannot imagine an anthropological practice

that does not rely on continuously gathering, articulating and re-specifying relations. Of course the particulars are multiple but all take relational form. Ceasing to take relational form they would not be recognizable as anthropological. In this case the question that must be dealt with is: how can one define as a task what is given anthropologists as an epistemological ground?

My way of coming to terms with this conundrum is to refrain from reading the motion prescriptively, reading it instead as a creative re-description. The motion does not define an out-of-the-ordinary demand or radical requirement. Instead it specifies – that is, re-describes, what is happening already. As a matter of fact, the motion says, anthropologists, like other scientists, are inventing relations incessantly.

I should like to end with a reference to an admirable recent paper by Alberto Corsín-Jiménez and Rane Willerslev (2007). This paper on ‘an anthropological concept of the concept’ is instructive in several ways. The anthropological concept of the concept can indeed be seen as a creative re-description. Based on ethnography among the Yukaghirs, Corsín-Jiménez and Willerslev argue that the shadow force of *Ayibii*, which informs local economic practices, because of its particular characteristic of ‘reversibility’, facilitates a rethinking of ‘the concept’ in anthropological guise’ (2007: 539). The paper is also noteworthy for its criticism of the relation. The reversible force of *Ayibii* is offered as an alternative to relationality, one that might potentially have ‘valency [as a] tentative epistemology for anthropology at large’ (2007: 528).

Here is an excellent example of indigenous categories, ethnographically derived, brought to bear on anthropological thinking. But these categories do not stand by themselves. Indeed, the particular qualities of the shadow force are articulated with reference to Spanish philosopher Eugenio Trías, whose criticism of the traditional delimitative definition of concepts paves the way for a philosophy of the shadow, which the *Ayibii* force can then come to illustrate. The specification of the anthropological concept of the concept also requires French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze to be brought into relation with the Yukaghir.

What comes to view through this creative endeavour, then, is that the anthropological concept of the concept is an invented relation. It works by tying together Siberian ethnography with Spanish and French philosophy. It risks invention by establishing continuity between Siberian objects of inquiry and anthropological objects of conceptualization and description: the result is to evoke new modes of relatedness that redefine all terms. Thus, relationality indeed remains self-evident. While making a move with which to move anthropology *beyond relations*, the authors have creatively extended the discipline by *inventing yet others*. Could it be otherwise? I should venture: of course not.

Notes

1. See for example the discussion of the relation between Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and Gregory Bateson in Jensen and Rødje (2010: 18–22).
2. See <http://www.jamesleach.net/dnc/>

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Opposing the motion: James Leach

Back in the early 1990s, when I first came to this forum, James Weiner pronounced it to be the most interesting and important in the discipline. I remember my sense then that if there was one thing I was *never* likely to do, it was stand up here! At that stage, I was just beginning to enter into relations with people who taught and practised anthropology. The unexpectedness of finding myself here today should tell us something.

Clearly I didn't invent the relations that brought me here. But relations are like that, not something we invent, but which take us on new journeys and produce new outcomes all the time. Why is this possible? Because, quite simply, they are not individual inventions.

To forge, and then revive, the GDAT forum was an act of creativity, and James Weiner's point was that the *relations between ideas and people*, brought to life in this debating arena, are vital for the discipline.

Creation then, not invention.

Why not invention? Because relations between concepts and people are the creations of all involved, 'persons know through other persons' as Tony Crook