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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

wrote (2007: 184), they have a life and trajectory in, and through, the people who body them forth, as it were, fragmenting, using, resisting and learning from the particular relations between concepts and between persons that anthropological theory and ethnographic practice instantiate.

In those relations, persons, arguments, positions, even institutions have come into being, been given life and substance, and have effected changes and developments in all our thinking (Ingold, 1996).

I am here this afternoon then to demonstrate a crucial distinction. That is the vital difference between creativity and invention. The latter, we are being told, is the task of anthropology. My contention is that the former is the crucial activity, and that it precisely excludes invention *when it comes to relations*.

Gillian and I are inevitably cast in the negative role here. To suggest that anthropology and anthropologist are not inventive. An impossible task. In fact, I am not going to argue that anthropologists are not inventive. Roy Wagner (1981 [1975]), for one (and one not *quite* chosen at random) leaves us in no doubt of the inventiveness of the culture of anthropology, a culture in which systems are built and models are invented, systems that relate things to one another, that make sense of them, contextualize and situate them in order with other things. So I will allow the practitioners of anthropology their inventiveness in making culture appear for the people with whom we study, in inventing typologies, culture areas, spheres and domains of activity.

Having allowed this inventiveness, one must be clear about how far one wants to take that acceptance: To accept the motion is to vote for an anthropology of individuals and society, one unreflexively based in western assumptions about the artifice of human life being in inventing relations that connect discrete entities. To agree that those entities are given in advance, specified by nature, and merely available for the inventive work of animating and connecting them by anthropologists.

But surely we do not want such an anthropology: one that demeans our interlocutors by turning away from the content and substance of their lives and making them into mere units to be connected and related by the inventiveness of the western analyst. To say that the task of anthropology is to invent relations is to say that relations are not intrinsic to things and persons, but attached after the fact of their existence.

All the familiar problems of structure and agency, of nature and nurture, of cultural constructions and natural givens come not only to determine what we can see in and of others' lives but, more importantly, to determine the relation of anthropology to the knowledge it produces. Claiming that anthropological knowledge is not co-created, not emergent in and from the relations anthropologists have as people – moral, ethical, political, social people – denies relations that we have with other people, and through those people, with ideas. It also fails to acknowledge the relations anthropologists' own concepts and assumptions have and generate, when run up against those of others in action.

Instead that it (anthropology) is imposed upon other concepts and modes of being, other people, imposed on, invented on people, not with and through them. So I ask you to consider very carefully: is 'invent' the right term when it comes to *relations*?

I have no doubt that our opponents will want to focus your attention on the issue of whether we invent relations (as agentive actors making sense of the world) or find them (blunder across them, already formed, in some naturalized fantasy of a world). They will no doubt attempt to enlist your *sympathy* by associating all you do with the former: artifice and inventing systems being the hallmark of humanity's proper endeavour, of social life, of science (Wagner, 1977).

But to ask whether we invent relations or discover them is to ask the Wrong Question for anthropology.

The binary of discovery or invention is part of *our* assumptions. I *do not* propose that the opposite to inventing relations is that we discover or find them ready made, and here is why.

The idea that relations are there in the world, waiting to be discovered, and independent of any description of them, is the outcome of a particular epistemological stance – one that assumes a distinction between what is given, and what is invented out of that given material. For people to invent technologies, for example, they must have available the raw material of nature, and know its properties.

The inventive act is in making use of what is given, is already there and discovered. The logic of this is so self-evident that it extends to the legal recognition of invention: one can only claim ownership of an invention if it demonstrates artifice – added mental labour, to what is *given by nature or history* (Sherman and Bently, 1999).

Now, my introduction of patent law here is not to send you all into a coma, even were it (hopefully) an acquiescent one.

Quite the opposite: it is important that we understand exactly what the motion implies, and that means clearly situating the concept of invention.

Relations flow from relations, and thus to misperceive the relational position of the notion of invention is a grave danger for anthropology.

Let me spell this out very straightforwardly.

The notion of invention is situated in a discourse that takes it to be an individual act of making something new and useful appear, and the legal understanding of the act is that it can be attributed to the individual person who undertook the task of making what was already there into something ingenious, novel and utile (Bently and Sherman, 2001).

I do not think this is a description of anthropology.

Instead, I wish to claim, or reclaim (Leach, 2004), creativity, a term with different referents, to be the key term for anthropology.

As I proceed to articulate the distinction between invention as individual construction, imposing mentally generated form on natural, found or given material, and creativity as collaborative, relational, unpredictable and socially generative,

I hope to convince you that anthropology's task may be to *create* relations, but that *it cannot be to invent them*.

But let us pause for a moment to examine the term 'task', situated, as it is, prior to, and motivating the action of invention, in the motion proposed by my esteemed Danish colleagues. Anthropology's task? What is this anthropology that has a task? What conception of anthropologists' work and effort is buried behind such an innocuous sounding term? It would be well to remind ourselves of Baudrillard's (1975) critique of Marx here. Though a powerful inversion of capitalism, for Baudrillard, Marx remains bound to a reductive image of the human being as *homo faber*, a labourer who is defined primarily in terms of economic production (Urban, 2003).

An anthropology *tasked* to invent relations invokes labour-centred and thus productionist assumptions. Unsurprisingly, but deeply worryingly, if one were to adopt the motion proposed, task and invention fit together into an image of an anthropologist moulding raw nature into systems external to the matter they organize, and into individually conceived products. The Task of Invention then, located so centrally and squarely in the dominant ethos and trajectory of western property relations, and of persons appropriate to that form, is one of making up, and imposing form on, passive and receptive material. The model is of an individual act of transformation which is recognized as such in law by private property rights over the thing invented.

The alternative to invention is not the discovery of a given and stable objective reality to relations – that is the *condition* of invention – but the active creation of meaning and communication through participating in relational emergence. Rejecting invention when it comes to relations is not a claim to a world independent of anyone before it is discovered, or invented, but a recognition of the co-creation of any and all human worlds and meanings, and of the joy and beauty of anthropology as the discipline that is most able to see this, and draw upon this truth.

I am here to present an argument that whatever this thing anthropology is, and whether or not it has tasks, the anthropologist engages in relations that *are neither given, nor invented, but realized in various forms of creative action*. The question you must ask yourselves is should anthropologists invent relations, or do they participate in the creation of things that have their position and meaning because of the relations they emerge within, and have their effects upon?

Marilyn Strathern has made the concept of relation central to her own creative anthropological practice. She highlights how anthropology's extraordinary 'creative energy' was released by bringing together two disparate senses of relations – those between ideas and those between persons (Strathern, 1995).

She claims 'The Relation' as both the legacy of our anthropological ancestors in this country, and the source of its ongoing contribution. It is this combination that is *creative*, not *inventive*, because what is created is an emergent entity, created by people and concepts merging, separating, fragmenting and overlapping. Such relations could not be *invented*, nor could they be controlled and owned,¹ and certainly not by one person or discipline.

The unexpectedness of The Relation – that we discover new and surprising things about ourselves and others in the process of making and exploring them, as do those others – shows us that in anthropological practice people engage in creative relations, even create relations, but certainly do not invent them.

Now my time is running short, but we must deal with a danger in the motion. The idea we invent *relations* carries the danger of a regression: regression to a previous stage in the development of the discipline where the connection and generativity of the relation itself, the situatedness of all and any effective knowledge in and as a relation, is misperceived as the property of one side, the genius of one element, and the resulting justification of imbalances in power, or rational capacity, or evolutionary development, or intelligence, would again dog the discipline, were we to accept this motion.

I ask you to consider, are we not beholden to our own history as a critical and engaged discipline, and by all those myriad others *with whom* anthropologists have learned, to stand out against a confusion of our creative practice, with invention?

Hiro Miyazaki (2006) has recently argued that there is a temporal mismatch between the tasks people engage in, with hope for the future, and anthropology's retrospective focus – always analysing what is there and what has been.² There is a danger also then in a retrospective orientation. But that danger is there if one thinks of ethnography as a distanced observation, a data collection about the world, gathering material – that is just that, in an old-fashioned, gendered, sense – inert matter, data about people and their lives – that can then be turned into something else through the invention of the anthropologist, outside their system and hopes (Miyazaki, 2006b).

What Miyazaki points to is another possibility, hardly discovered by him or me, that anthropology makes knowledge in relations with people. In doing that, something new comes into being – not invented as an instrument or property of one side, but co-created in relations between concepts, ideas and persons. In this, Miyazaki recommends an anthropology that mirrors the temporal orientation of the people anthropologists engage with, a forward-looking anthropology (Hallam and Ingold, 2007).

So to sum up: the argument I have made then this afternoon hinges on a simple, but crucial distinction.

That is, a distinction between invention and creativity.

In order to outline the difference, I demonstrated that invention is a concept deeply tied into notions of the individual, to individual labour on the natural world and to individual control over the outcomes of this labour. It can be no coincidence that the motion used the word 'task' – a concept derived from a productionist metaphysic, and indicating individual labouring.

Second, I demonstrated that the most famous and powerful use of invention in anthropology in the last 50 years, Roy Wagner's conception in *The Invention of Culture* (1981 [1975]), applies invention to the systematizing and model-building tendency in western epistemology, *not to relations*. Crook has written recently that what you know depends on who you are: and that is an outcome of relations with a

world one just did not invent, with others who one comes to know and realize potential with. 'Who one is' is a relational position, not an invention (Crook, 2007; see also Leach, 2003).

Third, I outlined the alternative to invention for anthropology: the creation of relations and co-constitution of meaning, and argued that the concepts of invention and creativity are anything but coterminous and interchangeable.

Finally, that the temporality of anthropological study must match the temporal orientation of persons and relations themselves, that the politics and ethics of anthropology demand co-creation of understanding and knowledge, sure, in contest, debate, misunderstanding, friction, but *not* imposition, and the realization of a proprietary control over output.

We are thus beholden to recognize that the 'task of anthropology' is *not* to 'invent relations', but to engage creatively in, and realize their potential through engagement.

We move between and enter into worlds through engaging, not inventing.

In the first of these debates, Tony Cohen (1996: 30) proposed that, 'our aspiration is to reveal the genius of those whom we study, rather than *our* cleverness in inventing *them*...' I rest my case.

Notes

1. The Deleuzian notion of 'lines of flight' is also relevant here.
2. ... the prospective orientation of hope as an impetus to reorient philosophical enquiry toward the future. I argue that the importance of the substance of hope for social theory resides precisely in its capacity to reorient the directionality of critical knowledge. (Miyazaki, 2006a: 166)

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Proposing the motion: Morten Axel Pedersen

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