

Assessment 2:

Construct, Generalise, Advocate: The challenges of modern Social
Anthropology.

Based on three GDAT-Motions, held up between 1988 and 1996

Anthropology has changed over the years, maybe because it is a quite young discipline, compared to other sciences, such as Philosophy, Mathematics or Physics, and arose primarily from a change of thought about humanity. We could say, anthropology started around the 19th century as Ethnography and the theoretical studies of indigenous tribes, when the industrialisation of western nations increased and the expansion of infrastructure made traveling easier, the curiosity about other cultures and people grew. Social Anthropologists gained their knowledge from reports, received out of third hand, from missionaries or travellers, which usually did not focus on objective and neutral accuracy of their papers. This way of gaining knowledge, naturally, changed over the years, especially after the great shift in theoretical paradigm in the British tradition with Malinowski, 1922 (Barth, 2005:22), and the new wave of functionalism (and structuralism), but most important over the act of rethinking fieldwork and the new method of participative observation and self - presence in the field. Anthropology as scientific discipline gained an important amount of knowledge about societies and culture, and the sobering truth, that it is impossible to do research on one community in its entirety, including all aspects of their lives, behaviour, ritual, heritage, norms and patterns, not to mention the influence of the Anthropologist him-/herself on the field and its participants, which later on should be reappraised in self-reflection. Even after this new wave of thinking and empirically working, it still takes time and patience for our discipline to get acknowledged in theory and practice, especially in our rapidly changing, globalised world.

Anthropology as science started out of curiosity about 'the others', the 'foreign', who were just known from stories of the 'new world'. Faulkner, Moscardo and Laws write, that the first travels were usually motivated by trade, war or exploration. But there happened to be another reason for travelling soon to be discovered, motivated by voluntary activities, that was mentioned in antique literature (2001: xxiii). It is only natural, that these movements of people, workers, guests and hosts, 'discoverers' and 'discovered', have already had a big influence on economic, environmental and furthermore, cultural- and social changes of a country, and its cultural heritage, and still have. Finding the source of a society's 'reality' is therefore almost

impossible, since it is not even clear what ‘reality’ for the individual means. Littlewood argues, that we cannot experience the world as it ‘really’ is, but only in terms of what we bring to it, which includes values (Ellen, 1990 in: Ingold, 1996:84). Those values we re-encounter usually in the cultural heritage of a society. Our knowledge of the world only takes shape ‘as’ culture, which we use as our instrument to clarify or, better, to justify behaviour and habit. Anthropologists, therefore, cannot capture the one ‘reality’, but only observe and later describe the captured values, knowledge and opinions, of a certain moment, in time and place. ‘Symbols mean different things to different people at different times’ (Cohen, 1988 in: Ingold, 1996:25). But this should not demotivate our valid position as scientific field, declaring our discipline as ‘pseudo-science’ (Ingold 1996:17). Anthropologists have to be very sensitive in dealing with objectiveness, individuality, or notions such as ‘authenticity’, ‘community values’, ‘heritage’, etc., that is true, but it does not automatically imply that there is no knowledge to gain, no social or cultural particularities to find, even if those discoveries probably are not measurable in the usual, quantitative style, that natural sciences would prefer to validate their theories. Still, as Keith Hart points out, cultural and social anthropology is more obsessed with internal affairs, than any larger conception of purpose of knowledge (Ingold 1996:18), which means, that in our discipline still exists questions and queries about its scientific purpose, definitions or use of methods, not only coming from others, but also from within our own discipline, due to different ways of thought and paradigm changes, which arise dealing with abstract and complex terms and phenomena. Furthermore, anthropologists are already struggling with their position, especially in empirical work, as there does not exist any case, in which the appearance of a researcher would not influence the field and infiltrate into a, at this point, ‘stable’ society, changing the behaviour of all its members. These disagreements almost ‘naturally’ arise, when it comes to studying the human ways of life and mind. Nowadays, trying to make a living as an anthropologist is not that easy. I would even break it down to merely two options for graduates, who want to stay in the field: 1) stay at the university, give lectures and try to do fieldwork within university-projects, 2) get active as advocate against social and cultural discrimination. Naturally it is impossible for all graduates of social- and cultural anthropology to stay at the university. Even if our discipline is usually a small department, the place would be a little bit crowded, and the claims or the working style of universities is not made for everybody, anyway. Furthermore, there seems to be an implicit hierarchy within anthropology as well, which privileges academic, theoretical - university - anthropology and regards any other (anthropological) activities as less valid (Stewart and Strathern, 2005 in: Kellett, 2009:24).

Therefore, the 'rest of us', who wants to work as an anthropologist, and that is still a considerable amount, I would say, has to get active on the other side of the protected walls of an education-facility. This usually happens in cooperation with companies, NGO's or institutions, which hire anthropologists for their opinions and expertise in their field for some projects. In a best - case scenario anthropologists get to work as part of a team with participants from different departments, researching and studying some phenomenon together. In the worst - case scenario they must work alone for some politically biased institution, that wants high quality collected data for some self-serving, devious reasons and specific purposes, probably even unclear for the researcher him-/herself, what is going to happen with the collected data, the gained knowledge. If it is the best- or worst-case scenario we find ourselves as anthropologists settled in, we should not forget, our influence on the field. For exactly that reason, the American Anthropological Association developed a few obligations, that we can follow morally and ethically, acting responsible towards society, and humanity itself. I am referring to the 'Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association', short 'AAA', which provides guidelines for anthropologists, for morally and ethnically tenable behaviour, while interacting with other societies or communities, on which to orientate. It was generated with the purpose of an appropriately use of knowledge (i.e. publishing, teaching, developing programs, informing policy, etc.) of the people of our world, past and present (AAA, 2009:1), summarised in six main points:

- 1) Responsibility to people and animals with whom anthropological researchers work and whose lives and cultures they study
- 2) Responsibility to scholarship and science
- 3) Responsibility to the public
- 4) Teaching responsibilities to students and trainees
- 5) Application
- 6) Dissemination of Results

(AAA, 2009)

If fieldwork, or academic, theoretical research, it can be argued for both, that from an epistemological perspective all anthropologists are acting as advocates, through the practice of the discipline (Kellett, 2009: 24), and everybody has some individual moral and ethnic - code to follow. The problem with the AAA-code is its Western influenced attempt to

generalise, socially learned emotions and habits, which genuinely does not only differ from culture to culture, but also from individual to individual, depending on and influenced from experience, socialisation and surrounding. There does not exist something like an ethical or moral standard, valid worldwide, but only guidelines, mostly established from industrial, western countries, orientated on former norms and their worldview on right and wrong. I do not want to argue against the guidelines, as I, myself grew up in an industrial country, socialised with similar believes of respect for, and protection of one another, but the AAA-code is another example for the gap between 'academic elite' and 'proletarian mainstream society', or as Peter Wade puts it in his introduction of the GDAT- Debate about advocacy in anthropology 'what social distance separates academic from non-academic practice' (1996:2). Furthermore, using notions, such as 'habitus' or 'social values' is additionally difficult, referring to the debate of 1990, whether human worlds are socially constructed or not. Tim Ingold, i.e. claims, that the perception of one's reality is rather a mode of engagement with the world, not a means of constructing it, while Wendy James, talking in favour of the motion, argues, that in the contemporary uses of 'discourse', 'practice' and 'habitus', we can find the attempts to capture the character of culture (1990 in: Ingold, 1996:84). She continues with a simple compilation of biological needs that interconnects all life forms, such as the search for food or shelter, mating, grooming and nurturing the young, as well as communication and control over territory, only to lead to the point where humanity, as biological 'race' differs from other life forms, through the construction of society and culture (James, 1990 in: Ingold 1996:88). What she did not have in mind was, that those 'constructed' societies and cultures appear together with moral guidelines to follow, legislative and executive and different values, supposedly transmitted historically (as well as constructed) to their descendants, causing an emotion of connectedness through shared past, present and future values. This emotional affiliation is something intangible, inherent in each individual and different from person to person. As Ellen articulates it: 'Social life is always provisional, "work-in-progress", never completed and therefore not constructed in any ultimate way.' (1990 in: Ingold, 1996: 85)

To still receive results in the field, anthropologists made use of different methods to distinguish those former mentioned patterns of societies and cultures. Categorisations of society's organisation, cultural heritage and values, symbolic and communication in a field made it easier to differentiate from/or connect societies with one another.

The problem with such attempts of generalisations are always the same, as it only exists in 'the eye of the generaliser' and can therefore never be objective. In social anthropology, if used, generalisations usually have the purpose to falsify, rather than verify a phenomenon. The 'truth', found through elimination of the 'false', is also something that happens, when it comes to advocacy or representation in the field. Who, and how can we, as social anthropologists, represent or help a community, if we are not believing in 'truth', but in a collection of 'non-truths'? How to decide about siding oneself with a group of people and their identity, is it not just those identities, we are educated to deconstruct (Wade, 1996:4)? Kellett gives another example for the difficulties of anthropology as (generalising) science and engaged fieldwork, in which he appeals to Ervin's table of types of social anthropology, and the difference between academic anthropology (i.e. theoretical and ethnographic research, studies of social issues, policy analysis, academic applied research) and applied anthropology (i.e. practicing anthropology) (Ervin, 2000 in: Kellett, 2009: 24), which implies a dichotomy between theory and practice, academical vs. applied, 'right' or 'wrong' purpose of research/knowledge, etc. In other words, before we can even argue about the accuracy of advocacy anthropology, first we always deal with the question of the scientific position of cultural and social anthropology itself. The very first GDAT debate focused on exactly that tension between science and humanism, and if it is even possible to generalise social practices, or furthermore, if it even has a purpose to do so. Eric Cohen questions, if, in this context, some characteristics of *collectivity*, gained in a field, are even enough for generalisations (1988 in: Ingold, 1996:15), while Keith Hart, next to his colleague Anthony Good, argues especially about the motion of science and its rest on the permission, to measure a possibility to know, what is objectively real (Ingold, 1996:20). In natural science, for example, norms and patterns often get to be methodologically categorised and generalised, as it is usually dealing with measurable matter. Humanities, on the other hand deal with the human mind, individuality of thoughts and realities, and often only refer to speculations and hypothesis. The tricky part in Anthropology is to find a way of understanding both sides. When it comes to fieldwork, anthropologists must deal with the 'individual mind', acknowledging, that every history of every human is unique and differs from each single one, and the 'community mind', starting with, sometimes measurable, habits and norms within a family, a social-circle, a city, a nation, a state, and so on. All included and described as 'culture', 'society' and 'heritage'. When it comes to the term of culture, the desire to preserve one's past and present day for future generations often shows in 'shared cultural heritage'. Today, the issue of values has become

the focus for treatment of heritage and is, according to Konsa, primarily used for the creation of national and communal identities (2013:123). Culture helps people to transcend time, and cultural heritage helps people to capture moments in time, and strengthen the sense of community, unity, and affiliation. While anthropologists can study the 'individual-mind' apart, mostly through interviews or observation, the 'community-mind' is a challenge, as the researcher him-/herself gets involved in any case, physically, as well as emotionally. According to that, Schepper-Hughes comprehensibly argues:

'[...] there was little virtue to false neutrality in the face of broad political and moral dramas of life and death, good and evil, that were being played out in the everyday lives of people. [...] What makes anthropology and anthropologists exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and political) stand on events we are privileged to witness?'

(1995 in: Kellett, 2009:26)

As understandable her point of view is, we should still not confuse social work with cultural and social anthropology. While the former one deals with the difficulties of resources, lack of accommodation, abuse or poverty among people, taking actions in projects, facilities, NGO's, etc., the latter should be handled as social science, therefore, as Anthony Good puts it, 'the study of meaningful human behaviour' (1988 in: Ingold 1996:25). Even if it is not the anthropologists aim to formulate universal descriptive and predictive laws, and 'going native' or get active, can be a welcomed action, to get involved in the daily life of the community and participate as member, to get a deeper view on meanings, purposes or social norms to study, it can also lead to a moral pressure. The anthropologist as expert in a field of development could possibly end in uncomfortable confrontations, through morally or ethically questionable situations (e.g. bad work conditions, abuse, political conflicts, corruption of government, etc.) (Good, 1988 in: Ingold 1996:29), which makes it hard not to interfere and leaves us with the question, if our work is not even redundant, if it is not done to make the world a better place, in the end. In my opinion, this question exactly, should always be carried in our minds, the moment we are entering a field as anthropologists. With the former wish, of making the world a better place, some may argue, that we are dangerously moving towards a Eurocentric paradigm change, as mentioned before with the example of the AAA-code, imposing a generalized moral-code on all societies, located in developing countries. Hastrup and Elsass explain advocacy as 'contradiction in terms', as it means to only defend one particular viewpoint, whereas anthropology should be about revealing diverse views (1996:5). In my opinion,

advocacy, action anthropology, or engaged anthropology does not automatically go along with the selection of only one *particular* viewpoint or motion. Furthermore, modern anthropology rests on the premise about the moral equality of all human beings (Fuller, 1995 in: Wade, 1996: 6). The anthropologist should therefore be considered as ‘mediator’, ‘interpreter’, an ‘intermediate link’ between parties of different interests. To gain as much knowledge about a society and its culture, and to experience our world in its widest possible originality, anthropologists try to stay neutral, already knowing, like Wendy James points out, that there does not exist a ‘culture-free mode’ (1990 in: Ingold, 1996:90), of greeting, eating, making love, shake a hand, preference of colours, and so on. While I can relate to her train of thought, she argues, that therefore ‘culture’ must be socially constructed. I would rather sympathise with Tim Ingold’s explanation, that ‘nature furnishes the substance and culture the form’ (1990 in: Ingold, 1996:94) of our reality, implying that not all subconscious patterns of behaviour are automatically (external influenced) constructed.

To conclude my statement, anthropology may has to continue with its search for generalisable hypothesis of ‘non-truths’, to get recognised as ‘real’ science, there may not exist a reality without any cultural or social affected perception, and the task of advocacy may never be free of western influenced, ‘moral codes’, but we, as anthropologists, are schooled in dealing with interpersonal relationships, social organisations, with history of colonisation, missionary, and diversity. Ideally, some of us are already educated in cases of multiple jurisdiction, as well as knowing about rites of passage, liminality and the importance of spirituality in some native societies. In contrast, we are also sensitised in the hierarchic method of colonial power, nationalism, the sociality of - so called - ‘developed’ countries, urban (sub-)cultures, globalisation, industrialisation, mass-movements and its effects on, for example, the economy of a country and its locals, or host- and guest relations. We know about types of transcultural communication, ethnohistory in general, and are usually equipped with a healthy amount of curiosity about social and cultural phenomena, myths, legends and perceptions of realities. Who, if not anthropologists, should intervene in our modern ‘world affairs’? Who, if not anthropologists, should engage as mediators between two colliding realities? In the end, it should be our aim, as it should be from whichever scientist, to educate, enlighten, be critical, and motivate younger generations.

As Ellen already mentioned wisely back in 1990, ‘*arguing over words does not advance learning.*’ (1990 in: Ingold, 1996: 86)

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