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The task of anthropology is to invent relations: 2010 meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory

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Introduction – Soumhya Venkatesan and Matei Candea

[t]o draw a comparison, or make an analogy, is not necessarily to impute connection: it may indicate a resemblance, rather than a relation, and the resemblance may be fantastic, rather than real, ‘magical’ (Jackson 1987). Yet the very act of comparing also constitutes a making of connections, and evokes a metaphorical relationship. (Strathern, 2004: 51)

It is like the difference between comparing one’s thoughts and feelings to a winged creature and speaking of the *functional* connections between the wings of birds and

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of bats (a true analogy) or the *phylogenetic* connections between the wings of birds, the front flippers of seals, and our own upper limbs (a relation of homology). (Jackson, 1989: 186)

The foregoing quotes index some among the many modalities of the relation which have historically been woven together in anthropological knowledge practices: the construction of heuristic analogies, the crafting of evocative metaphors, the disentangling of superficial resemblances from empirically traceable connections, the forging of new relations both between concepts and between people.

At different points in the history of the discipline, debates have focused on the relative value and centrality of these various modes of relating to anthropological knowledge-making. Functionalist anthropologists derided the conjectural history of their evolutionist predecessors, taxing them with the invention of spurious relationships between different historical states of social institutions; they in turn found themselves accused of confusing metaphor with structure in their talk of social function and organism (Evans-Pritchard, 1950). At the same time, and orthogonal to these debates, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard counterpoised their respective claims to direct ethnographic experience as against sharp delineation of theoretical structures and models (Stocking, 1984). This distinction between ethnographic and theoretical relations remained central to anthropological modes of argument, and indeed resurfaces in the present debate.

Invention v. discovery: necessary tension or red herring?

Nevertheless, in the 1970s and 1980s, the grounds of the discussion shifted. The epistemic injunction to privilege relations that were found rather than fabricated or discovered rather than invented, which had been central to the above modes of argument, was itself attacked as outdated and 'positivist' (see Roscoe, 1995) by self-declared interpretivists and more radical proponents of a 'literary turn' (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1988). Invention, creation and fiction were presented as not only unavoidable but also positive aspects of anthropological knowledge-making. The resulting bitter debate between positivist and interpretive versions of anthropology – our own microcosmic echo of the 'science wars' (Parsons, 2003; Ross, 1996) – pitted analogy and metaphor against structure and analytical explanation, art against science and invention against discovery (although see Wagner, 1981, whose distinctive take on the invention of culture troubles this interpretivist/positivist contrast, and implicitly informs a number of the positions taken in the present debate).

The 2010 Group Debates in Anthropology (GDAT) debate contained in these pages is diagnostic of another shift in the grounds of this ongoing anthropological discussion about knowledge and relations. Indeed, it seems that the opposition between discovery and invention is now cast as a red herring rather than inevitable and consequential. Thus, while the first speaker for the motion, Casper Bruun Jensen, begins by highlighting the implied contrast between 'inventing relations'

and ‘discovering’ them, his account quickly makes clear that the ‘invention’ he is defending is of a very different kind from the interpretive or metaphorical opposite of discovery outlined by Jackson. Anthropologists invent relations, argues Jensen, insofar as they creatively manage to ‘establish a continuity between the object of description and the description itself’ (Viveiros de Castro and Goldman, 2009, quoted in Jensen, below). This particular kind of inventive ‘magic’ disturbs *both* the expectations of a naive positivism *and* those of a theoretically omnipotent free play of ideas.

Jensen draws on a rich tradition in science studies which has argued that ‘[n]either discovery, nor invention, as usually understood, can account for the ways in which sciences operate’. Construction, as has been frequently pointed out within this intellectual tradition, does not stand in opposition to reality (see for instance Latour, 2005: 90, for whom this realization marks the end of the ‘science wars’). Jensen thus calls for anthropologists to abandon these superannuated distinctions in favour of a notion of invention as creative re-description. In a recursive twist, Jensen claims that creative re-description is also precisely what the present motion itself does: inventing relations is what anthropologists, like other scientists, have been doing all along!

James Leach, speaking against the motion, also strongly argues against the relevance of the discovery/invention contrast to the present debate. Morten Axel Pedersen, speaking for the motion, does not even touch on it. In fact if the contrast is anywhere partly upheld, it is perhaps in Gillian Evans’ presentation (against the motion), and her argument that while inventing relations means bringing something new into being, anthropology’s task is ‘*not* to invent relations, but to accommodate to, to co-create and to explain thereby (in words and concepts that can never do justice to the lived experience), the historically specific form of relations among collectively distinctive kinds of persons’. Ironically, however, Evans’ presentation is the one which might on the face of it seem the least sympathetic to positivist modes of argument: her piece took the form of a live musical performance accompanied by Evans’ beat-poetry style ethnographic description of the performance (the whole adding up to a particular lived experience to which the mere text printed below cannot, indeed, do justice!). Clearly, the import of Evans’ argument is precisely to contrast the event (the ongoing, improvised invention of a relation between people, things and musical styles) and its description (the proper task of the anthropologist). And yet, the discreet presence of the word ‘co-create’ in the above quote, also marks the distance travelled since the clear-cut lines in the sand drawn by the 1980s anthropological science wars.

The demise or blurring of the invention/discovery contrast was challenged by two questions from the floor during the general discussion. Chris Martin (LSE) noted the absence from the discussion of the word ‘evidence’ – to which Pedersen replied, in line with Jensen’s arguments above, that evidence itself is a particular kind of invention. Picking up on a different strand of the discussion, Jon Mair (Cambridge) noted that by not addressing ‘the naive interpretation of the motion’ (invention *as opposed to* discovery), participants were eliding the question of

responsibility: which relations is the anthropologist responsible for bringing into being?

Invention, creation and task: the ethical turn

Mair's question points to an important turn given to the debate by Leach's intervention. In place of the invention/discovery contrast, Leach proposes that the crucial distinction in fact lies between invention and creativity. Invention, Leach argues, is situated in a particular western discourse of authorship and intellectual property as 'an individual act of making something new and useful appear'. By contrast, creativity is 'collaborative, relational, unpredictable and socially generative'. Anthropologists do not simply invent relations, they create, or rather *co-create* (a term that Evans used as well) them with their informants in the field. Leach's underlying point concerning the need to read the motion in *ethical* terms became a central and enduring feature of the debate – albeit one that remained hotly contested.

Although the word 'invention' received the lion's share of the discussion, the words 'relation' and 'task' did not go unchallenged either. Morten Axel Pedersen's take on the motion focused on the concept of the relation itself as an ongoing anthropological invention, to the point of asking whether 'by continually reinventing the relation, anthropology must eventually come to obviate this concept by making the intensive basis of life so conventional that it needs no further mention'. Pedersen raised a number of definitional issues which were picked up again by interventions from the floor, such as the distinction between relations and (mere) connections, and that between intrinsic and extrinsic relations – relations which come respectively before or after the terms they relate. This latter distinction featured explicitly both in Jensen and Leach's talks – although it cut across the motion in different ways in each case as will be seen in their pieces and the discussion below.

To conclude, we would like to note a broader discomfort, on both sides, with the word 'task'. Whereas all four participants seemed to articulate an agenda for anthropology, not all were equally comfortable with casting this in terms of a 'task'. Nevertheless, as Marilyn Strathern pointed out in her comment from the floor, through their multiple divisions, all four participants accepted and carried out admirably the task they were set by the apparatus of GDAT itself, with its polarized motions, arguments and voting: the common task of reinventing anthropology's underlying similarity of purpose.

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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