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In *Culture, Context and Anthropologists' Accounts*, Deborah James, Evie Plaice, Christina Toren (eds.), Berghahn, New York/Oxford.

Chapter 10

The Door in the Middle: Six Conditions for Anthropology

João de Pina-Cabral

Some of the best minds in anthropological theory over the past decades have been warning us that modernist anthropological theory has come to a serious impasse.¹ Modern anthropological theory comprises the conceptual frameworks that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reaching its peak in the 1930s and 1940s, and then entered into a process of critical self-questioning around and after the 1960s. Fifty years after the optimistic formulations of Parsons, Kroeber, Fortes and Gluckman, the central concepts that laid the ground for the development of our discipline are viewed with suspicion by most anthropologists today. In this paper, I argue that we can neither deny the value of the critique nor resign ourselves to the air of gloom that results from it. I suggest some ways out of the impasse.

'Is the concept of society theoretically obsolete?' One might lean towards either side of the famous Manchester debate,² but one has to acknowledge that it makes sense to ask the question. Similarly with the concept of culture. Having examined its history, Adam Kuper concludes that 'it is a poor strategy to separate out a cultural sphere, and to treat it in its own terms' (Kuper 1999b: 247).³ In a related vein, Marilyn Strathern (1992a, 1992b, 1999), Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2002b) and Roy Wagner (1981) argue that the modernist theoretical mould depends on three essential sets of polarities that can no longer constitute pillars of our thinking. But they have also shown how those polarities have surreptitiously

survived in the categories we continue to use and in our modes of acting as anthropologists. These are, to use Viveiros de Castro's summary: primitive versus civilised; individual versus society; and nature versus culture.⁴ In his history of the concept of the 'primitive', Adam Kuper (1988) laid out the historical ground for such a realization.

Despite being very much alive, relevant and active as an empirical discipline, anthropology has for too long been theoretically gagged in relation to the other social sciences, sociology in particular (cf. Pina-Cabral 2005a). Although our research areas expand and we are making significant contributions to the understanding of the central problems facing our contemporary world – such as AIDS, journalism, homelessness, terrorism, to name just a few (see Bastos 1999; Hannerz 2004; Passaro 1996; Donahue 2007) – our capacity to intervene theoretically has been diminished by our persistent attachment to formulas of disciplinary definition that are no longer scientifically defensible (cf. Pina-Cabral 2006).

It has been argued that the problem lies in the very nature of these pillars, in that, as with all modernist thinking, they have written into them a utopian disposition. Modernist thought was driven by what we might call expectation concepts (cf. Bolle 2004: 273, see also Latour 1993). The dynamism of such notions lies in that they describe by reference not to what is (or was) but by reference to an expected future. Thus, the opposition primitive/civilised assumes the eventual victory of civilization; the opposition between individual and society assumes both the eventual victory of the individual (as Mauss and Durkheim clearly stated) and the future coming of a fuller condition of sociality (as Marx predicted); finally, the nature/culture opposition assumes the victory of culture and science over nature.

Dystopian Modernism

If we remain bound by such expectation concepts, even though we may well lose faith in the future, we still have not freed ourselves from the framework they imply. We move from a utopian posture to a dystopian posture, but we are still in the shackles of a futuristic expectation.

Over the past ten years, anthropology has given signs of this type of gloom (Pina-Cabral 2007b). Many adopted deflationist attitudes, giving up on or being agnostic about the possibility of knowledge of the real; many accepted discursivist descriptions of socio-cultural life, slipping into a rhetorical game of liberated meanings; many continued to call themselves social scientists but abstained from knowing what science is, and some even raised the possibility of there being alternative anthropologies and alternative sciences. Some gave up on generalisation grounded in ethnographic observation. Finally, some entertained the notion that there may be no such thing as a 'human condition'.

Such attitudes are essentially negative. Instead of opening up new paths of empirical and theoretical exploration, they remain trapped within the terms set by the modernist oppositions which caused our initial dissatisfaction. They are the posturings of those who, faced with the discovery that the expected future has not materialised, have despaired of the future overall. This, however, is not a tenable position. It makes more sense to follow the lead of Adam Kuper (1988, 2005; see also Mintz 1994: 290) and question the bases of the 'primitivist' hypothesis that supported the scientific project of twentieth-century anthropology.

In order to do so, however, we also have to query some of the central presuppositions that underpinned it – most particularly the metaphysics of group-ness that accompanies the utopian disposition: that is, sociocentrism. The term – coined by Durkheim and Mauss in the last pages of their essay on primitive classification (Durkheim and Mauss 1963) – points to some of the sets of oppositions mentioned above. It reveals three tendencies: firstly, to treat social entities as unitary and self-defined (individual/society); secondly, to approach modernity as a uniquely creative move (primitive/civilized); and thirdly, to reify ideas as representations outside the world (nature/culture).

The problems we face today are largely derived from our unwillingness to shed the utopian dispositions we inherited from the early modernists. This applies not only to the anthropological theory that we produce, but also to how we produce it. In an insatiable search

for yet another ‘master’ thinker who will take us to a higher level of theory, we continue to search for yet another paradigmatic shift that will free us from the perplexities of the past.⁵ But this is a quest for a mirage. As Adam Kuper has shown, we cannot afford to cut loose from our anthropological heritage, but we should not remain bound to those aspects of it that cause us problems (Kuper 1988, 2005). There is no contradiction in looking for ‘a door in the middle’: that is, in giving up on radical breaks and searching for humbler solutions that will allow us to practise anthropology and ethnography in new ways whilst building on our distinguished heritage. The six conditions that I outline below are not seen as definitive answers to old quandaries, but as paths out of this dystopia.

Realism

The real is neither at the point of arrival nor at the point of exit: it poses itself for us, rather, midways.

—João Guimarães Rosa, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (2001)

It is important to continue to hold that, in ethnography, we can capture the real. Ultimate truth will always evade us but lesser truths – which, over time, accumulate – do not. Empirical research is a complex and exacting task. But the difficulties in undertaking it are worth overcoming because the knowledge that results from it proves to be more resilient and less prone to observational disagreement than our everyday knowledge of our surrounding world. Despite many circumstances which mediate such knowledge, the ultimate value of empirical observation and theoretical rationalisation cannot be denied.

We must learn how to distinguish epistemological relativism from methodological relativism, since, whilst the former is a dead end for our discipline, the latter is its basic trademark. Anthropologists have often been tempted to conclude from the fact that the lived world is historically constituted, that the constituting process is all there is; that is, that there is

no world. Some claim, emphatically, that since anthropology is a Western system of knowledge it cannot presume to be better or more embracing than the local knowledge systems it studies. According to this view, any claim of scientific status or of a form of progressive accumulation of knowledge based on the maximization of rational enquiry is taken to be demeaning of the people anthropologists study and thus morally suspect.

This argument assumes that to favour a scientific approach is to make claims to its being morally superior to everyday means of knowing the world. In other words, it assumes in modernist fashion, firstly, that everyday life can be lived according to science, and secondly, that such a life would be somehow morally superior. If these assumptions were valid, then the peoples being represented in our studies would be entitled to complain about the scientific status of ethnography and anthropology. They are, however, unfounded. Further, it is anthropologists rather than the people they want to represent who are despondent about modern science. Such a stance represents an incapacity to distance oneself from the expectation concepts concerning primitivism and individualism. It also means a continued embracing of modernist sociocentrism.

Moreover, the posture presumes a moral obligation to represent the people studied. The anthropologist speaks for 'their' people. Thus, sociocentrism meets paternalism in a narcissistic discourse which ultimately privileges the ethnographer over their informants. If anthropology *were* 'Western' and I *were* 'Western', then it would not be morally suspect for me to prefer 'my own' discourse over that of another.⁶ But the wider world in which anthropologists are situated is far more complex than their local everyday context. Their participation in a global ecumene⁷ brings with it an obligation to respect the views of others. Anthropology is not 'Western'; it is an intrinsic part of that global ecumene that is the reason for anthropologists' sense of responsibility to respect the ideas of others.

In a postcolonial setting, the practice of ethnography has altered fundamentally. This is so, not only because ethnography and anthropology are now routinely practised by people

whose identification as Western is doubtful, but also because the people anthropologists study have found new ways of negotiating the knowledge anthropologists produce (Ramos 1998). The paternalistic assumption that the anthropologist's methodological mandate to respect the people they study extends to a right to represent 'their people' (a collective constituted out of ethnographic practice) is highly suspect. The world where ethnography is practised today is one where the ethnographer is likely to encounter anthropologically trained 'natives'. A new condition of mutuality is, thus, inscribed into the ethnographic encounter that makes for a far more complex political engagement of the ethnographer in his or her field.

Deflationism (the belief that truth is not a valid category) is thus something to be avoided if we want to pursue our activities as anthropologists and ethnographers. In anthropology, Kuper warns, relativism goes hand-in-hand with a form of implicit idealism (Kuper 1999b: 19). To question the possibility of access to truth – or to pluralise truth – is to retreat into the realm of pure ideas. Whilst this might appear to liberate one from the pitfalls of ethnocentric interpretation, by opening the way to a plurality of perspectival approaches, it actually reconstructs the problems of sociocentrism by reifying the groups or peoples that are supposed to hold such views.

The move to idealism, and the retreat to the realm of ideas, eats away at the possibility of anthropological knowledge. If we want anthropology to be possible and ethnography to thrive, we should avoid such forms of dystopian depression. But this does not mean that we should engage in blind positivism. Some of the recent attempts to revive robust types of scientific realism are just as much acts of despair as culturalist deflationism. As contemporary philosophers have shown, we do better to steer towards the 'door in the middle'; that is, some form of minimal realism that will allow us to operate methodological relativism whilst avoiding epistemological relativism (see Lynch 1998).

Limited Interest

Ethnography and anthropology are not and have never been a discourse on the native's discourses (see Viveiros de Castro 2002a). As was stressed by earlier anthropologists, neither society nor culture offered themselves ready-made for the anthropologist to describe. Rather, anthropologists had and still have to construct their object from observations of everyday, taken-for-granted events, many or most of which are not discursive in the sense of being planned acts of communication. And because events are constitutive processes, acts of communication and social categories of action (persons, groups, and so on) are profoundly intermeshed in historically complex ways.

Two central aspects mediate our ability to observe and describe human lives as they are lived: firstly, the play of intersubjective relations, both as they operate in the production of local meanings and vis-à-vis the ethnographer; and secondly, events in the surrounding or environing world whose parameters may remain implicit (Davidson 2004). These inform what ethnographers can understand of the human setting in which they find themselves, including those explicitly formulated events in terms of which they interpret locally recurrent forms of historically constituted engagement. Moreover, understanding intersubjectivity necessarily entails an analysis of its political, economic and other dimensions; that is to say, an analysis that reveals the constituting forms taken by social relations in any given case.

Analysing the play of intersubjectivity in the environing world provides for a more thorough and subtle understanding of domination, for example, than is available by means of discourse analysis. The idea of discourse, in Foucauldian or Deleuzean terms, of course includes power (cf. Lutz and Abu-Lugod 1990; Viveiros de Castro 2007). But all discursivism ultimately implies a dystopic denial that the world outside of human sociation impinges on human sociation and that our shared or surrounding world is also part of our ethnographies. The very acts of practising and of writing ethnography would be impossible without decisive attention both to this environing world and to the way in which earlier acts of communication have been reified in each particular setting. It is essential to recognise the complex process of

triangulation which occurs between the interpreter, their human others, and the surrounding world. Mintz gives an example of this relationship when he observes that:

a profound difference between the history of our discipline in Europe, on the one hand, and in the Western Hemisphere on the other, inheres in the simple fact that our [American] subjects of study, our 'primitive' peoples, were our neighbours – our ill-treated, indeed often persecuted, neighbours. In this instance as in others, the anthropology we do and have done is conditioned by the history and social complexion of the society whence we come (Mintz 1994: 290).

Triangulation occurs at all levels: the ethnographic encounter is shaped by it at both ends. It is shaped, on the one hand, by the local, historically informed relations of triangulation and, on the other, by the complex process of historical constitution of disciplinary agendas. As Davidson put it, 'relativism about standards requires what there cannot be, a position beyond all standards' (Davidson 2005: 181).

Like all human action, anthropology is interested, in the sense that it is engaged in the world; it has implicit within it an investment on the part of the agent (personal or collective). Bourdieu, in his treatment of the notion of habitus (Bourdieu 1980), shows that the border between conscious and unconscious interest is of little heuristic use when studying human action (see also Davidson 2005: 286–7; Pina-Cabral 2007b).

Interest is related to motivation which, in turn, is defined by two central parameters: on the one hand, the categories of identity that inform an agent's motivational perceptions and, on the other, the intersubjectively produced categories that characterise the field of action. The central value of the notion of interest is that it allows us to understand social action as a constant negotiation of the future and the past in intersubjective terms. The issue of simultaneity, to be discussed later, is relevant inasmuch as it limits the directedness of interest. No person bears only one identity. Diverse forms of investment in the world combine in any particular social

action; interests limit each other and compound one another, way beyond the capacity of unilinear or single-minded intention (whether this be individual or collective). The concept of interest, then, is only useful to the extent that it is seen as limited. It is possible to investigate the limits of interest in any specific case of human action, thus gaining some insight into the complex process of triangulation that characterises it (see Pina-Cabral and Bestard Camps 2003). That, too, is a door in the middle.

Meaning

The proclivities of sociocentrism to treat both social entities as self-enclosed units and categories or ideas as things (as actual pictures in the mind) appear to be independent of each other. They are, however, determined by the same modernist need to separate subject from object, action from thought, fact from value (cf. de Coppet 1992: 70). The fact that the two tendencies appear mutually independent merely contributes to their mutual validation. This is argued cogently by de Coppet in his historical account of the evolution of the concept of representation. It is difficult to follow him to his ultimate conclusions, however, because of his continued attachment to a hard concept of 'society/system'. This runs counter to my present argument: that modernist sociocentrism is best eradicated from the study of what it is to be human. The critique of such a notion of society does not, contra de Coppet (*ibid.*: 70), necessarily imply a retreat into individualism. It is erroneous to attribute a separate ontology to personhood and to collectivities (societies, cultures, groups, systems), since to do so is to reproduce the metaphysics of group-ness that characterised the thought of Comte, Durkheim and their followers, one of the greatest hurdles that social anthropology has met with throughout the twentieth century.

To overcome this hurdle it is necessary not only to transcend the dichotomy which counterposes individuality and group-ness. Existing ideas about meaning also need to be interrogated. Anthropologists have been working for too long with a semiotic theory of

representation that is arguably dependent on an ‘essentially incoherent picture of the mind’ (Davidson 2001: 52). More sophisticated theories of meaning are required, which emphasise both the socially relational aspect and the fact that meaning is dependent on practical experience. Giddens points to anthropologists’ implicit adoption of a theory of meaning that is epistemologically unsound: ‘those who speak of a crisis of representation in anthropology, or who see anthropological work merely as a species of creative fiction, are the victims of a false theory of meaning’. He traces the origin of this to the structural linguistics of Saussure and the way in which ‘meaning is understood [there] in relation to a play of signifiers, not – as it should be – in the context of practical experience’ (Giddens 1996: 124–5).⁸

This ‘picture of the mind’, as Davidson calls it, has become so deeply engrained in our philosophical heritage⁹ that we find it almost impossible to escape its grip, even when its noxious effects become apparent.

In one crude, but familiar, version it goes like this: the mind is a theatre in which the conscious self watches a passing show (the shadows on the wall). The show consists of ‘appearances’, sense data, qualia, what is ‘given’ in experience. What appear on the stage are not the ordinary objects in the world that the outer eye registers and the heart loves, but their purported representations. Whatever we know about the world outside depends on what we can glean from the inner clues. (Davidson 2001: 34)

Contrary to this, Davidson argues, we have no use for the notion of ‘purely private, subjective “objects of the mind”... Beliefs are true or false, but they represent nothing. It is good to be rid of representations, and with them the correspondence theory of truth, for it is thinking there are representations that engenders intimations of relativism’ (ibid.: 46).

To reject such a theory of meaning does not mean that we must reject the need to understand the processes of semantic integration that constitute the favoured paths in our

universe of beliefs. These, ultimately, are what the ethnographer searches to identify (Pina-Cabral 2004). The ethnographer's method is essentially to make sense of what others are doing and saying in terms of an assumption of essential human similarity and a world that is common at once to self and other. And here we return to the notion of triangulation:

We are bound to suppose someone we want to understand inhabits our world of macroscopic, more or less enduring physical objects with familiar causal dispositions; that his world, like ours, contains people with minds and motives; and that he shares with us the desire to find warmth, love, security, and success, and the desire to avoid pain and distress.... [U]nless we can interpret others as sharing a vast amount of what makes up our common sense we will not be able to identify any of their beliefs and desires and intentions, any of their propositional attitudes. (ibid.: 183).

This passage deserves the attention of anthropologists, since few have chosen to give attention to the simplest processes that make for the possibility of their favoured form of empirical knowledge – ethnography. By these means, rather than taking for granted the possibility of simple human communication in the face of interpretative indeterminacy, many might have avoided the destructive and deeply unsettling slide from methodological relativism to epistemological relativism that has so troubled the discipline since the 1960s.

To this must be added something that is implicit in the passage of Mintz's quoted earlier: ethnographers do not work in a private individual setting. They are never alone with their subjects of study except if and when they choose to discard their professional robes. Ethnography and anthropology are processes within a collective pursuit with a collective past and a presumed collective future. And that is not 'the history of the West', whatever that might mean. Rather, it is the complex and ongoing history of the constitution of a global ecumene that is increasingly becoming available to all.

Such a global ecumene is, of course, structured by shifting relations of domination

because the process of making meaning always implicates the form of relations it engages. But there is no point in despairing of this. On the contrary, we must take the fact that our own scientific activity is immersed in human history as the very starting point of our efforts to know more and better. As Merleau-Ponty pointed out:

Since we are all hemmed in by history, it is up to us to understand that whatever truth we may have is to be gotten not in spite of but through our historical inherence.

Superficially considered, our inherence destroys all truth. As long as I cling to the ideal of an ideal spectator, of knowledge with no point of view, I can see my situation as nothing but a source of error. But if I have once recognized that through it I am grafted into every action and all knowledge which can have a meaning for me, and that step by step it contains everything which can exist for me, then my contact with the social in the finitude of my situation is revealed to me as the point of origin of all truth, including scientific truth. (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 109)

Here, too, is a door in the middle that allows us to avoid both the utopian and the dystopian fantasies of completeness.

Freedom and Necessity

‘Human sciences’, claims Fernando Gil, ‘have taken on the task of resolving the paroxysmal antinomy of Kantian freedom and necessity’ (Gil 2004: 11). He defines ‘necessity’ by reference to determination: that is, in Aristotelian terms, the condition that something comes next unless something else prevents it from doing so. Curiously, anthropologists in the twentieth century have avoided this antinomy – perhaps because of the theoretical paroxysm it implies.

Freedom of the will has played a very small role in anthropological theorizing, despite having permeated all good ethnography. The few exceptions can be seen in those writings

where anthropologists talk about the actual people from whose behaviour they try to abstract; for example, through situational analysis (e.g., Van Velsen 1964) or methodological debate (e.g., Casagrande 1960). The notion of determination is, however, either taken for granted in generic terms or too easily derided. In anthropological literature, necessity in human behaviour is most often linked to Malinowski's theoretical blunders concerning 'needs'. This word has a bad name in anthropological theory, being used most often as a blanket term in order to iron out some logically unsatisfactory theoretical jump.

When Boon and Schneider, for example, justify their culturalist reading of Lévi-Strauss's oeuvre by trashing the notion of 'the hypothetical "social needs" of the group' (Boon and Schneider 1974: 807), they close off important doors to interdisciplinary debate concerning relative human determination. Worse still, they manage to sidestep the issue of the freedom of the will, ignoring the fact that one cannot be considered without the other. Cultural determinism comes to be hidden beneath a thin veneer of liberal goodwill. They try to clean up Lévi-Strauss's arguments about the atom of kinship by transposing these to culture – which they understand in purely semiotic terms as the realm of 'ideas.' They complain that, as a response to his British critics, Lévi-Strauss has (correctly, they argue) 'shifted his kinship models to their *proper* cultural level' but (unfortunately, in their view) he 'left the *vestigial* social cohesion arguments' (ibid.: 816, my emphasis) in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Lévi-Strauss 1969).

Contrary to Boon and Schneider, however, such an option would not have resolved the problem of the ultimate social import of kinship. It would continue to be necessary – ultimately – to talk of 'groups' and 'units', as indeed they do: 'Societies do not *have* patrilineal or matrilineal systems; rather groups or parts of groups reveal ideas of such marriages which might be carried out to various extents' (Boon and Schneider 1974: 810). Thus, their culturalist reduction to ideas only succeeds in delaying, postponing or obscuring the inevitable talk of group-ness – raising the far more problematic notion of knowing what exactly is an idea as held

by a group.

This is a problem with all culturalist anthropology, as is apparent, for example, in Ortner's most recent attempts to integrate power and practice into culture (Ortner 2006). Her efforts are genuine and valuable but they remain constrained by the fact that, concerning culture, no dependence on ideas is possible that does not ultimately postulate the group that holds them. Talk of material 'needs' is avoided, but cultural determination rules and freedom of the will is neglected. In any case, since groups always lurk behind cultures, we are bound by theoretical honesty to enquire what these groups are, how they are formed, and how these ideas relate to the groups or units that hold them.

Again according to Boon and Schneider, 'in myth, man's analogical capacity ... is portrayed as being dependent on its materials only insofar as it must have something ... to work with.... [Similarly] we might relax our preconceptions as to the genealogical and social organizational nature of 'kinship' data as well (Boon and Schneider 1974: 815). The dependence on previous interpretation in order to recognise the occurrence of myth or kinship, and the dependence for that on triangulation with others and the world, are simply taken for granted, as if they were matters of small concern. Man's materiality is taken to be secondary to his ideas – merely the wall on which the cultural shadows are reflected. This is as extreme a form of idealism as anthropology will ever manage.¹⁰ The hegemonic position that Schneiderian idealism has assumed in global anthropology over the past two decades is surely one of today's principal theoretical hurdles. It does not help us to ease any of the perplexities caused by sociocentrism, neither those concerning 'group-ness' nor those concerning 'representation'. As Davidson warned, 'the notion that our will is free from physical determination has prompted many to hold that the mental and the physical must be discrete realms, but if they are somehow decoupled, it is a question of how knowledge is possible. Skepticism and the problem of free will are symmetrical problems' (Davidson 2005: 277).

In fact, the antinomy between freedom of the will and determination only becomes

troublesome to the extent that we avoid it. Anthropologists ought boldly to address the issue and develop ways of mediating it. Humans are subject to determination both to the extent that they live in a material world and to the extent that they are constituted by a human environment where rationality and language operate. The latter institute new forms of causality, new 'needs'; the two forms of determination converge. This is what Davidson calls the anomaly in our ontological monism: there is only one world, but rationality sets in motion new styles of causality within that world.¹¹ This means that all human action is confronted both by its 'underdetermination' (e.g., *ibid.*: 318) and by its 'unpredictability' (see Arendt 1958: 233). That is, we are incapable of determining not only the causes of our actions, but also what their impact will be on the world. Again, in Gil's formulation, 'the unpredictability resides less in the mere intersection of causal series than in the *simultaneity* of occurrences in the particular here and the particular now' (Gil 2004: 5). Hazard accompanies our every move.

Thus, the fourth condition highlighted here is that, when considering human thought and action (that is, when interpreting the actions of humans in the world), the anthropologist should be satisfied neither by talk of random choice nor by talk of absolute necessity. We cannot settle either for a Sartrean notion of freedom or for a Malinowskian notion of need. Freedom and necessity do exist in the human condition but, due to the anomaly in our monism, they have to be seen as mediated. We must avoid anthropological determinism, whether this be positivistic or, as is the case with the example presented above of Boon and Schneider, idealist in character.

If human action is underdetermined and unpredictable, any unmediated notion of necessity is invalid. But the idea of necessity has a number of distinct implications (see Gil 2004) depending whether it is seen as opposed to what is possible (i.e., capable of happening), to what is contingent (i.e., determined by circumstances not yet established), to what is free (i.e., unconstrained), or to what is indeterminate (i.e., not capable of being determined as, for instance, in the above example of simultaneity). Theorising the determinations of human action

in a world characterised by anomalous monism requires a search for a mediation to these antinomies.

Thus, we observe occurrences that are not merely possible but probable; not merely contingent but frequent; not merely free but relatively unconstrained; not merely indeterminate but spontaneous. When these four conditions meet, we are faced with observations that have a high level of generality and a special relevance for the study of the human condition.

Anthropology has long silenced the discussion of universals of the human condition. When the topic surfaces, it is usually met with dystopian derision. The reason for this is that, despite some useful insights by Needham (1981: 20–24) concerning ‘primary factors’,¹² most anthropologists have understood ‘universals’ in terms of ‘needs’. It has been thought that if something were to be a universal then it would have to be observable always and permanently in all historically known instances of human sociation. This, however, is a mistake, since it implies that phenomena of human thought and action are subject to the same type of causality that characterises inert substances. The anomaly in our world means that no such causation will ever be found in matters of human thought and action.

A universal of the human condition, therefore, can usefully be redefined to cover what Needham (1978) called ‘proclivities’ – that is, dispositions of thought and action that are probable, frequent, spontaneous, and for which there seems to be an inclination. Through this ‘door in the middle’ we can search for instruments of interpretation that do not imply an abandoning of generalisation. In many ways, this position is not only akin to Adam Kuper’s advocacy of a universalist viewpoint but also very similar to that espoused by Maurice Bloch in his recent essay on seeing and lying, where he argues that ‘we might attempt to generalize about a phenomenon such as the recurrence of the association between truth and sight without ignoring important anti-universalist points’ (Bloch 2008: 22).

Alterity and System

Modernist sociocentrism relies on a contrastive notion of alterity that sees it as a relation between two or more entities that stand apart from each other. Societies and cultures, as much as individuals, are assumed to be closed upon themselves and oppositionally related. This kind of sociological monism, however, is unwarranted. Alterity and identity in human affairs are not symmetrical (Levinas 1996; cf. Pina-Cabral 2005b). Alterity both creates identity – in the ethical face-to-face relation that constitutes persons ontogenetically – and reflects it. Social entities (persons or collectives) are not elemental units, for they are mutually constituted. Similarly, ‘mental categories’ are also not subject to treatment as things or pictures, due to the ultimate indeterminacy of interpretation (Davidson 2005: 316).

Thus, for example, to accuse anthropology of focusing on continuity to the exclusion of change (Robbins 2007) does not really address the issue, since it focuses exclusively upon only half of it. There have, indeed, been many anthropologists over the past decades who have focused on change at the expense of continuity, but that did not solve the problem.

Anthropologists lack a socio-cultural language for dealing with change. But we also lack a language to describe long-term fixity and continuity in anything other than a unitary manner (Pina-Cabral 1992). The problem has to do both with schism *and* continuity, to quote Victor Turner’s famous title (Turner 1957). The basis of the problem is that the emphasis on sameness has prevented a more complex understanding of alterity.¹³ We must abandon the notion that societies and cultures (and the groups that hold them) are *things* to the extent that they are identical with themselves. Identity is produced by alterity and, thus, it is always preceded by it.

Embracing processualism will not, in itself, resolve the problem if one remains trapped by a sociocentric concern with unitariness. Instead of seeing social entities as enclosed units, we must understand that they are the result of continual processes of identification. No identity is ever fully accomplished, as identity is a momentary crystallisation of the processes of identification and differentiation that are constantly going on in human settings. Identity is not a ‘picture in the mind’; rather, it is the historically specific observable effect of these processes.

Being the sediment of history, identity is constantly challenged by it – that is, by the continuation of the very same processes that produce it. This must prompt us to give up our unitarian concept of identity. Modernist thinking tended to see the unitariness of groups and societies as equivalent to that of individuals. Thus, sociocentrism and individualism usually converged: in Fortes’s work on kinship this is explicitly elaborated in the notion of the ‘juristic person’ (Fortes 1969: 301). Calling our attention to this, Marilyn Strathern claims that ‘in anthropological discourse, systems, like conventions or like societies and cultures, were frequently personified as agents with interests of their own – an image laminated in the picture of corporate groups as juristic persons’ (Strathern 1992b: 97). However accurate, this formulation raises further problems, since it presupposes that all agency must be limited to individuals, to physical persons, and hence that no suprapersonal entity can be attributed with it. This presupposition is not only empirically erroneous but theoretically disturbing, as it suggests a re-entry of individualism by the back door. As de Coppet (1992) warned, it presumes the greater unitariness of the person as a level of social identity.¹⁴

The presumption of unitariness has implications for our daily activities as anthropologists and ethnographers. Our main instrument of analysis is the search for system in empirical fields that we have delineated on the basis of earlier analyses. The notion that the ethnographer’s task is one of interpretation is yet another instance of a half-truth that, through a fallacy of all-or-nothing, is taken to represent the whole (Pina-Cabral 2007b). Interpretation is merely the beginning of an ethnographer’s task, as they have to place the interpretations they gather into some sort of analytically relevant whole. The relevance of such a whole will not emerge from everyday interchange or be limited to the ethnographic present, but rather builds upon the history of anthropology.

When we look for patterns, correlations, or correspondences, we are in fact looking for system within fields that we, or our predecessors, previously outlined. Anthropology is familiar with such pursuits, and has made its greatest achievements precisely when carrying out this

type of exercise. Major discoveries – such as that of the existence of classificatory systems of kinship, of rites of passage, of segmentariness, or of matrimonial strategies – have depended on the postulation of system and on the identification of forms of structural causality and structural transformation.

One of the conditions for the continuation of anthropological thought is to accept certain lessons from our predecessors regarding how systemic analysis yields insights into how we humans live in our enviroing world. In doing so, unitariness should not be granted to socio-cultural entities; entity status should not be given to ‘ideas’; and structures should not be viewed as complete and self-regulating. The structuralism of the 1960s and 1970s is no longer a possibility, and removing it to the realm of ideas, as Boon and Schneider (1974) would have it, is unhelpful. Once more, a mediation or ‘door in the middle’ will allow us to profit from anthropology’s accumulated methodological legacy, and to arrive at a mitigated structuralism.

If, as Gil claims, ‘to be able to conceive a mobile order is the ambition of all great philosophy’ (Gil 2004: 17), it should also be the ambition of anthropology. Following a suggestion laid out by Musil (1995), Gil defines ‘mobile order’ by reference to three great aporias – or contradictions – of human action: power and limitation, arbitrariness and law, freedom and measure. These may not be easily resolvable, but if engaged with boldly they will allow for an acceptance of the open-ended and incomplete character of anthropological enquiry. They will enable the realization that domination, though it is a founding element of human thought and action, will never be absolute; that normativeness, although a permanent feature of social life, will never be fully enforceable; and that freedom is matched by measure at all levels. Human imagination is free, creativity exists, but always within the bounds established by the fact that persons and collectives have been historically constituted.

Affects

Finally, anthropologists must come to terms with the fact that humans cannot leave their skins.

Our human condition is the ethical base of our scientific thinking. All forms of thinking are both in the world and human, that is they are ethically geared to action.

This focus on ethics – and, consequently, on affect – is in sharp contrast to prevalent modernist sociocentric attitudes, which have encouraged one to see the relation between social entities as one of conflict – either between units or between independent partners. They do not focus on the limits of interest but presume interest to be incumbent upon elemental units (persons or collectives) and, thus, univocally determinable.¹⁵ The result is a cynical model of social existence which is essentially conflictual, and of unequal power as a form of violence, in which there is a constraining of the interest of someone by someone else. The particular version of this that has become hegemonic in anthropology over the past decades is largely due to the vulgarisation of Michel Foucault's so-called 'Nietzsche's hypothesis' (Foucault 1977; cf. Hoffman 2007: 757). This amounts to the notion that 'the history that bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language – relations of power, not relations of meaning' (in Chomsky and Foucault 2006 [1971]: 147).

Since the publication of Foucault's final lectures at the Collège de France, however, it has become possible to trace the evolution of his thought during the late 1970s. Foucault's formulation of Nietzsche's hypothesis arose from his direct and active engagement in politics, particularly the politics of race (Hoffman 2007). As the latter evolved, Foucault started to understand that 'the discourse of race war which had served as the harbinger of his own thinking about power [was being] transformed into an integral, biologically driven "state racism".' (ibid.: 758) Thus, finally, he came to ask himself, 'can war really provide a valid analysis of power relations, and can it act as a matrix for techniques of domination?' (Foucault 2003: 46).

The concern of Foucault's more mature years was to query this overt and warlike domination. In this way he approaches Emmanuel Levinas's concern that 'it is by no means certain that, at the beginning, there was war' (in Finkielkraut 1997: 12). This is an area of

anthropological thinking which requires further theoretical elaboration since, as Foucault discovered, this kind of formulation often turns out to be the harbinger of the very processes that it aims to critique (see also Fry 2005). Rather, once we question the modernist sociocentric mould, we are faced with a totally new picture of the relationship between power and sociality. Inequalities of power must be identified with war, and domination seen as brutal violence, only if identity is seen as symmetrical with alterity. But such a perception is challenged if we recognize that ‘Human experience is social before it is rational’ (Finkielkraut 1997:10). The roots of domination are present at the very moment of the constitution of the person. The first person never existed; all people were created by other people. The very possibility of understanding depends on sociality as much as sociality depends on understanding – and, at the root of it all, on the learning of a human language.¹⁶

Wittgenstein’s enigmatic comment that ‘meaning something is like going up to someone’ (quoted in Davidson 2001: 107) thus makes more sense. We see more clearly now the origin of Boon and Schneider’s (1974) error: they wanted to separate meaning from sociality; ideas from persons. But persons are constituted by meaning and meaning can only exist in the ‘surrounding’ world: ‘The basic situation is one that involves two or more creatures simultaneously in interaction with each other and with the world they share’ (Davidson 2001: 128). Communication requires that a person must agree to follow the paths that they perceive others to be tracing (ibid.: 114).¹⁷ If anthropologists are to escape the trap laid out by modernist sociocentric conceptions of social entities, and of meaning as representation, they have to start working empirically, that is ethnographically, with the notion that at the root of all sociality lies not conflict/war but docility/negotiation. This can also be called ‘charity’ (Quine 1969: 46; Davidson 2005: 211), ‘coresponsibility’ or ‘fraternity’ (Levinas 1996; Finkielkraut 1997). Ethnography would not be possible if we did not recognise humanity in others and if we and they were not essentially, fundamentally, formatively docile. This may be why ethnographers are so keen to call their subjects of study ‘friends’: such a term may be a euphemism, and

paternalistic, but at the root of it lies a real sense of empathy based on a shared feeling of coresponsibility, an ethical relation of co-constitution.

When I call on docility as the root of sociality, the reader might be led to think that I have stopped watching the news on television. Not at all. It is not necessary to forget the horrors, the betrayals, the heartlessness, to come to terms with the fact that domination does not arise between social entities violently. Rather, that which allows for the constitution of social entities can later turn to violence (Finkielkraut 1997).

To persist – dystopically – in finding solutions that rely on sociocentrism and on a semiotic theory of representation, is to make it more difficult to understand social relations. Instead, it is at the level of affects (ethical dispositions, not to be confused with morals) that the meaning of such relations must be sought. This will allow a reconstruction of the conditions of possibility of anthropological analysis and of ethnographic enquiry.

The Door in the Middle

By using the phrase ‘the door in the middle’ I aim to capture the spirit of the six conditions outlined above. Seen together, they represent an argument in favour of a new form of classicism, a new engagement with the historicity of anthropological knowledge. Such an engagement is opposed to the modernist model of knowledge construction as being based on leaps towards new ‘paradigms’, a model which Martins (1974) calls caesurism . Curiously, most authors that left their marks on anthropological theory in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, whilst being explicitly post- or non-modernist, continue to conceive of their activity as producers of anthropology in vanguardist modes. The procedure involved is the following: firstly, to postulate a break in understanding at a certain moment in history, corresponding to some sort of new theoretical insight marked by a master – be they Marx, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Foucault, Schneider, or Deleuze – and then, secondly, to cast into irrelevance all that went before thus claiming to open a whole new era.

This procedure typifies and catalogues, in a linear process of overcoming, the various modes of carrying out anthropology as if they were unitary and indivisible, as if they were ‘prototypes’ or *episthèmes*. Thus, it produces ahistorical critical objects that, much as they may be useful for the teaching of undergraduates, are difficult to identify with any intellectual honesty: ‘structural-functionalism’, ‘1980s relativism’, ‘classical kinship theory’, and so on. My argument, to the contrary, is anti-caesurist (Pina Cabral 1992, 2007a): it denies that there can ever be any decisive break, any paradigmatic shift, any radical theoretical caesura in the thinking of social scientists.

The pretension that such breaks can exist is often self-interested and derives from a type of academic anxiety of influence mixed with a desire not to consider the arguments of ‘old timers’. For example, if all that went before Schneider’s critique of kinship (Schneider 1984) becomes ‘classical kinship theory’, or all that went before ‘postcolonial studies’ is ‘colonialist anthropology’, these bodies of knowledge can be safely ignored. But if, instead of claiming decisive breakthroughs, it became possible to build upon anthropology’s established claims, then the ‘door in the middle’ would be our way. This would make it possible:

- (1) to assume a position of minimal realism,
- (2) to work with a notion of limited interest in the study of human action,
- (3) to capture the process of triangulation in the constitution of meaning,
- (4) to open once again the debate concerning universals by a more complex approach to the issue of determination,
- (5) to re-engage creatively with systemic analysis through a mitigated structuralism, and
- (6) to approach a theory of relations of domination that avoided the pitfalls of the notion of power as violence. In this way, we might be able to bring to fruition in our empirical research (both ethnographic and comparative) the profound critical discoveries that have characterised anthropology since the late 1950s without being imprisoned by its sociocentrism.

I propose that we should stop looking at the future, in a utopian way, as if it was

incommensurable with the past. We should embrace the historicity of social knowledge not as a condition but a desideratum. Following Merleau-Ponty's injunction quoted above – and much like Quine when he formulated the notion of the indeterminacy of translation – we must realise that the historicity of knowledge is not a limitation; rather, it is the very ground of the possibility of social anthropology.

Adam Kuper's lifelong engagement both with our heritage from the past and with our active contemporary debates is, to my eyes, one of the best models that we could follow for a truly creative practice of our discipline.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a seminar on ‘Anthropology, Now and Next’, organised by Christina Garten and Helena Wulff in honour of Ulf Hannerz, at the University of Stockholm, September 2007. I am grateful to all the participants for a fascinating debate. Later, I also gained considerably from the symposium ‘An Epistemology for Anthropology’ (sponsored by the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the Institute of Social Sciences, Lisbon, and held in September 2007). I am indebted to critical comments by Peter Gow, Dominique Boyer, Luis Vasconcelos and Catarina Frois. Christina Toren’s intellectual friendship has been a special privilege.

2. This debate was between Marilyn Strathern and Christina Toren, who supported the motion, and J.D.Y. Peel and Jonathan Spencer, who rejected it whilst agreeing to the relevance of the topic: see Ingold (1996: 55–98).

3. In the face of the author’s prudent conclusions, the anger with which this book has met is to me a clear sign of how academics are more afraid of what threatens their jobs than what threatens their ideas.

4. Source:

http://www.ppgasmuseu.etc.br/museu/texto/Curso-2006-1_EVC-MG_MNA-806.doc.

5. See Hermínio Martins’s classical criticism of ‘caesurism’ as a theoretical disposition (Martins 1974).

6. This represents a qualifier to the perspectival identification of ‘anthropology’ with ‘Euro-American’ that has characterised Marilyn Strathern’s Schneiderian turn in the 1990s (see Strathern 1992a: 98).

7. See Hannerz (1992, 2004). However, I see this concept first as an instance of sociation rather than merely in terms of ‘culture’, thus diverging from Hannerz’s ‘ongoing effort to explore what social anthropology can credibly contribute to the understanding of global or transnational

cultural processes' (Hannerz 1992: 34; cf. 2004). Second, these processes are rooted in the history of the modern era (Mintz 1994) rather than being limited to the twentieth century.

8. Viveiros de Castro points to something similar: 'the old postulate of the ontological discontinuity between sign and referent, language and the world, which guaranteed the reality of the former and the intelligibility of the latter and vice versa (and which served as the foundation and pretext for so many other discontinuities and exclusions – between myth and philosophy, magic and science, primitives and civilized – appears to be in the process of becoming metaphysically obsolete; this is the way in which we are stopping to be, or better, are stopping to ever-having-been modern' (2007:95). See also Gudeman (this volume).

9. In the case of anthropology, the most important influence is probably Durkheim's dependence on a French style of academic Kantianism.

10. Perhaps this is why Lévi-Strauss (1984, 1988) never took their advice in the matter of kinship studies.

11. In this matter, Davidson follows both Aristotle and Spinoza in arguing that 'there is only one substance [but] the mental and the physical are irreducibly different modes of apprehending, describing and explaining what happens in nature'. Thus, together with these philosophers of the past, he sustains 'the conceptual irreducibility of the mental to the physical' (Davidson 2005: 290).

12. Needham's belief that these 'elementary forms of thought and action' are direct responses to 'properties of the cerebral cortex' (Needham 1981: 25) was ultimately unuseful.

13. This might be another way of seeing Hanna Arendt's argument that modernity has witnessed the triumph of the notion of 'sameness' (Finkelkraut 1997: 103).

14. This would explicitly go against Strathern's treatment of the Garia person in the same paper (e.g., 1992b: 101, n.13).

15. This is one of the reasons why the concept of 'interest' was treated with suspicion (see Mauss 1950: 271).

16. The requirement of having learnt a language in order to be able to think does not mean that communication demands the sharing of a natural language (Davidson 2005: 89–108).

17. This has been corroborated by the recent identification of the neurophysiological mechanisms underlying the understanding and imitation of action, António Damásio's 'as-if-body loop' (2003: 125–6).

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