Anthropology and the Dialectic of the Enlightenment: A Discourse on the Definition and Ideals of a Threatened Discipline

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The knowledge practices of social and cultural anthropology can be conceived as undergoing constant methodological reconsideration or reformulation as a consequence of internal critique and of institutional change effected in the larger educational and political environment. Neo-liberal shifts affecting the institutional context may have influenced a deepening of the crisis in anthropology where the nature of its project has become less certain or has threatened a reconfiguration of such proportion that anthropology may be losing sight of its direction. This essay explores some of the Enlightenment roots of social and cultural anthropology. It is presented as very much an idea that embodies and reflects what Adorno and Horkheimer discussed as the dialectic of Enlightenment. The argument presented is less pessimistic claiming that the distinction of anthropology is in its pursuit of Enlightenment ideals that it has maintained and rehoned as a consequence of its own routine internal critique. The vital implication of the discussion is that anthropology is in a situation of serious threat in largely a post-Enlightenment world. In such a context, the methodological ideals that emerged as integral to the spirit of anthropology are well worth maintaining rather than abandoning. The ideals that are addressed are conceived to be integral to the importance of anthropology as critique and as a knowledge practice capable of sustaining a profound contribution to the understanding of the potential that is human being.

Anthropology! The idea is vast: the study of human being no less! The concept is all-embracing, potentially open to all forms of human practice and thought. It often seems that nothing is beyond anthropological attention. New topics are continually appearing on the anthropological horizon as the parade of ‘Anthropology of...’ collections or a brief glance at the subjects addressed in the Annual Review of Anthropology attest.

If anthropology was, as Levi-Strauss suggested, dominantly concerned with cold societies, this is far from the case now. Anthropology it can be said has come in from the cold and is through and through focussed on issues and problems conditioned in diverse ways by the heat of modernity. The interests of anthropology have broadened exponentially and there is little that seemingly escapes its gaze. Anthropologists have
systematically attacked dimensions of its practice that risked anthropology becoming a relic of a bygone age, especially those aspects that associated it with the imperialism and colonialism of the past. Many of the conventional categories and orientations which seemed to have defined anthropology have either been seriously challenged or rejected—the totalising concepts of culture and society, the notion of tribe, the idea of difference or the radical Other, the analytical frameworks of structural-functionalism and structuralism, to mention only a few. If anthropologists once concentrated on human groups at the periphery of modernity, were fascinated by the exotic defined as historically or spatially distant from or at the edge of the metropolitan realities of dominant capital, this is no more. Everything is now judged to be in some way or another modern, inside rather than outside, in the sense that Hardt and Negri (2000) have written famously of Empire. Anthropology would seem to many to have been reinvented, made relevant once more, rescued from being consigned to the dustbin of history.

Alternatively others might see some of the efforts to reconfigure the discipline, conceptually and methodologically, as a kind of *hari kiri*, an act of disciplinary destruction on some altar devoted to the pragmatics of survival. At the very least, to follow the line of a comment made years ago by Clifford Geertz (2000[1983]), regarded by many as the prophet of the present situation, there has been a blurring of the genres, of disciplinary boundaries whereby the distinction that once seemed to be anthropology has gone, anthropology melting into other disciplines that themselves have lost their distinction sharing a broad range of common perspectives or theories.

In this regard, anthropology is commonly associated with Cultural Studies, the latter being seen by some as the legitimate successor to the former. A few anthropologists have even formally announced their change of allegiance. Anthropology has been criticised for not seizing the intellectual opportunities that those in Cultural Studies were keen to grasp. In fact, judging by the number of shelves devoted to Cultural Studies in the bookstores, and the dramatic decline of those for Anthropology (indeed, anthropological works are sometimes categorised as Cultural Studies), it is reasonable to assume that Anthropology has been supplanted by Cultural Studies.

It would be easy to see this state of affairs as reflecting an historical intellectual progression: Cultural Studies is to Anthropology as Postmodernism/Postcolonialism is to Modernism. There is much to it. Nonetheless, it is far too simple for, in my opinion, the equation disguises the fact that Cultural Studies arises more out of administrative/bureaucratic decisions motivated by economic concerns rather than intellectual ones (see Kapferer 2000). Cultural Studies often designates a space of refuge for those from a range of disciplines or subjects whose spaces were eaten up or otherwise deemed irrelevant in the university reconstructions flowing from neoliberal, often market, demands. This in no way is intended to devalue the intellectual worth of much that is classed as Cultural Studies but to note that Anthropology was far more a positive rather than reactive intellectual product.

Anthropology began as an idea to which Cultural Studies is in no way parallel or comparable. It was an idea before it was established as a university discipline, and when established attracted adherents from across the range of the humanities and sciences, as it still does, and in many ways exists as a bridge between them. Anthropology was/is an idea that drew a commitment to it as such. What this idea is, precisely, is not always clear, for anthropology is a highly contested space continually being pulled in several often opposed and conflictual directions. It is an idea in process. Nonetheless, in my attempt here to outline some of the key parameters of the anthropological idea as value and practice, I will argue that anthropology (and I am concerned mainly with social and/or cultural anthropology) exists in a critical space between the humanities and the sciences, drawing
on dimensions of both in its practice, and in certain respects transcends the divide. The
contribution of anthropology among the knowledge practices concerned with the nature
and circumstance of human being is conditioned in these aspects, as I will explain, in
which it is neither a science nor a humanity yet in many senses both. As such,
anthropology has many of the potential characteristics of a liminal space, one of intense
critical reflexivity not just on its own practice but on other knowledge practices which
surround it and with which it often intersects. Anthropology has its potential in its being a
discipline at the margins, in being perpetually on the outside even when it is inside (i.e. of
metropolitan arenas within arenas of dominating power, even of an imperial kind).1
Perhaps always in a state of crisis, crisis being its condition of being, my discussion will
imply that it is now in danger of losing some of the vital aspects of its idea, as this has
historically formed. In other words, anthropology is being redesigned more positively as a
discipline of the inside, even being brought to repeat, paradoxically, aspects of a past
practice for which the discipline has been sharply criticised, often by anthropologists
themselves.

**Anthropology as an Enlightenment Idea**

The features of anthropology that I have outlined have their source in the European
Enlightenment. Anthropology is through and through an Enlightenment idea. We can trace
anthropology’s beginnings (as indeed the idea of the Enlightenment itself) both as a
humanity and as a science to earlier times, to the historian Herodotus and to the Greek
philosophers, or to the Renaissance. But anthropology as an idea in its current dynamic
form is a construction out of the rupture that is modernity and the processes of the
Enlightenment, a highly arbitrary concept. As Foucault (1984) and many others have
demonstrated, the Enlightenment is virtually synonymous with modernity and its multiple
formations.

The Enlightenment has its beginnings in the seventeenth century, reaching a peak in the
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Born in the wake of the religious reformation, the
voyages of European discovery, and the emergence to dominance of Capital, the
Enlightenment spirit was oriented broadly to the liberation of human being from its various
forms of bondage. This was to be achieved in Reason or through the application of the
highest consciousness of human being, one founded in the logic of the mind freed from
those confusions to logical consciousness and rationality based in the senses of the body or
in those human authorities whose Reason, explanations or understandings, were not
grounded in the thoroughgoing examination of the available evidence.

The Cartesian idea of radical scepticism is central to Enlightenment conceptions of
scientific enquiry whereby knowledge is subject to evidence that is cognised or thought
through by the logical operations of mind freed from the distortions and illusions wrought
by the senses of the physical body. For Descartes, mathematics manifested the pinnacle of
human achievement by means of which knowledge through evidence could be attained.
The highest exemplar of Enlightenment reason was science conceived to be grounded in
objectively certain fact exposed to a logical rational consciousness epitomised by
mathematics.

There was at the outset of the Enlightenment an intrinsic science/non science rift. For
Descartes what are known today as the arts or the humanities were effectively cast among
the non-sciences. Thus, history in the rationalist Cartesian vision only dealt with facts,
which were open to multiple interpretations. As such history had no potential for certainty
and, therefore, it could not be an objective science (see Cassirer 1951[1932]: 201).

However, the overall process of the Enlightenment or the internal discourse of the
Enlightenment was shaped around how a science or rather a diversity of sciences covering all areas of nature or human created circumstance could be achieved: how Reason in its highest form as the logic of human consciousness could be established in different ways relative to the phenomena in question. In other words, the direction was how the scientific ideals of Descartes, for example, even despite Descartes, could be achieved for different kinds of objectively recognised phenomena.

The debates in the Eighteenth Century regarding history as an Enlightenment science are fascinating as a reading of major figures such as Voltaire, Bayle and Montesquieu show. I say this because they foreshadow many of the arguments that anthropologists are involved with today. Bayle (2000), for example, shifts the pursuit of objective reason in history away from a concern with the True to a concern with unravelling the False—each supposed fact must be subjected to sceptical scrutiny. Montesquieu, in his *The Spirit of Laws* (2002 [1748]), is concerned with revealing underlying principles in historical process but is antagonistic to attempts to reduce the variety of forms and practice to rigid patterns or schemes (Cassirer 1951[1932]: 215). Where Montesquieu focuses on the state, Voltaire presents a progressive history of custom (*Essay on Manners* (1756)). The two share a dislike for determinism, Voltaire making Liebniz the mark for such distaste in *Candide* (1759). Voltaire sees an identity between history and natural science where both reveal what is ordinarily hidden: in the case of history the intellectual forces beneath the diversity of human custom or practice. The problem is far more difficult for history, in Voltaire’s (also Montesquieu’s) view, because the force of history is diversity, difference, the accidental, whereas in natural science there is (was) a fundamental orientation to resolute determinate unity. Voltaire is thoroughly against facts in themselves, blind empiricism—but insists on searching beneath or through the diversity of the surface facts to what they may reveal underneath.

Throughout the Enlightenment, particularly in the arguments of its philosophy, there is a variety of reactions to or reconsiderations of Cartesian objectivism, specifically that regarding the bracketing out of all except the operations of pure abstract logical disembodied reason. Thus Kant in the *Critique of Judgement* (1987 [1790]) modifies aspects of his arguments in earlier Critiques (and distances himself from a Cartesian objectivism) by including the importance of subjective, sensory knowledge, as well as the imagination and intuition (as do Vico and Montesquieu before him) in the pursuit of objective explanation and understanding.

This Kantian orientation in anthropology is most powerfully apparent in the work of Levi-Strauss whose *Mythologiques* manifests both an opposition between reason and experience, the concrete/objective and the subjective, myth and ritual, science and art as well as their unity in the work of explanation and understanding. Levi-Strauss places these in hierarchical relation (the dominance of the objective and scientific over other forms of knowledge). He displays another and critical dimension of the Enlightenment. This is, not only should knowledge be pursued through Reason and subjected to radical scepticism but also the construction of knowledge should be oriented to the revelation of universal structures of Reason that are embedded in ideas and practice.

The Enlightenment was devoted to revealing the universal logics of reason within forms of existence and establishing the rule of Reason in the orders of human creation, but this should not ignore the diversity of argument and position within the Enlightenment. What Adorno and Horkheimer (1997 [1944]) called the dialectic of Enlightenment refers to the conservative and oppressive, the Dark Side of the Enlightenment as it were, as well as the revolutionary, indeed liberating, possibilities of Enlightenment thought and practice: the Enlightenment as throwing up its own potentials of critique as well as the suppression of such critique. The Enlightenment as instrumental in the orders of imperial expansion and
in the processes of colonial domestication is well-known but it is also a force in their resistance.

In many ways, the effects of the Enlightenment are still with us, but an Enlightenment that is no longer European but global. The contemporary focus on the potency of scientific and technological knowledge, their connection with a new imperialism, has emerged with other associated processes—a revitalising of nationalism, the politics of identity, ideologies of Human Rights, reenergised calls for democracy, a renewed assertion of the powers of unshackled creative individualism, a new territorialisation of regions of Unreason and a concern to domesticate them. These and the critiques that are directed at them indicate, if not a rebirth, an extension of the Enlightenment.

This is even so with many Post-Enlightenment rejections of the Enlightenment whose assertions are part of its dialectic. The European Romantic movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is staunchly opposed to Enlightenment themes (as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are opposed to Kant and Hegel) but the Romantics are nonetheless conditioned within it. The Romantic Movement is a major source for some poststructuralist and mainly North American postmodern critiques of modernism but these are not completely at odds with Enlightenment orientations, despite an antagonism to universal frames of explanation and a refusal of its positivist possibilities. Nonetheless, we may indeed be at the end of the Enlightenment. This is so both in the shattering of any unity of the sciences and the humanities under the light of reason and in a certain re-valuation of mysticism in some quarters of the humanities and of metaphysics in science (e.g. see Bohm 2002) which Enlightenment thinkers strove to avoid. Of course, much what I have referred to as the return of mysticism is more than merely this but a reaffirmation of the role of the human imaginary in the production of knowledge which objectivist, positivist, and rationalist orientations in the Enlightenment rejected or suppressed.

This brings me to a broad point. Anthropology is not merely an Enlightenment project. It is more or less the Enlightenment or, rather, a dialectic born of the Enlightenment in microcosm. It is a discipline that includes the several directions of Enlightenment discourse, even reissuing them as in empiricist and positivist assertions at one extreme and thoroughly subjectivist positions at the other. Anthropology as a discourse community combines the contradictory forces that developed in the history of Enlightenment processes including the manifold critiques that were spawned in the context of Enlightenment thought and practice.

Anthropology institutionalised as a discipline in many ways expressed a false unity, a coherence that suppressed a sense of the different and often already opposed directions (e.g. see Barth et al 2005). Here, I think, contemporary postmodern critics of the notion of anthropology as a discipline in some kind of coherent unified sense (e.g. Gupta and Ferguson 1997) have a very strong point. However, the institutionalisation of anthropology as a defined discipline in the Enlightenment sense, with a specified object of ‘scientific’ concern, through the fact that anthropology was made a container of contradictory and powerfully conflicted orientations to the study of human being was in many ways a creative act, constituting what I consider to be the important uniqueness of anthropology.

At the time of the founding of the main departments (starting in the late nineteenth century and especially after World War II) the humanities/science division in the modernist university was well-developed. This was exacerbated in a subjectivist (humanities)/objectivist (science) dualism and a growing gap of ignorance separating the humanities and the sciences. The latter was famously described for the Anglo-Saxon world as the two cultures by C. P. Snow (1993) who took a science-oriented view. The science/humanities dualism was expressed in an increasing antagonism between them represented most recently in the Sokal (1999) controversy aimed at what was seen as the
abuse of scientific knowledge and the confused thought and writing considered to be perpetrated by postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives among the humanities. The Sokal event, I note, is ironic for it was born in processes from the humanities side—inspired by poststructuralist philosophers such as Deleuze—aiming to achieve a rapprochement of the sciences and the humanities in terms similar to, if different from, that of the early Enlightenment. This was so, however, not on the conditions of a superiority of scientific knowledge over other kinds of knowledge, but on the terms of equality and parity (see Deleuze and Guattari 1994).  

While anthropology, at the time of its establishment, was constituted in terms in some ways counter to the current of the times it was nonetheless marked by the division between the humanities and sciences in the larger intellectual and political field of the modern university. This was managed bureaucratically, either by internally dividing departments (especially in North America which adopted the four fields approach) or by creating independent departments, for example, of social anthropology and/or cultural anthropology—the pattern in England and the Commonwealth and in Scandinavia.

Despite this, the idea of anthropology as a science in the Enlightenment sense was sustained, although in some decline by the second and third generation of anthropologists among whom the science/humanities division may have bitten more strongly (as reflected in some directions in postmodern anthropology). In other words, anthropology did not fit easily into either the science or humanity split and was an idea on its own, hors de categorie, a pangolin. This was exemplified in some reactions to university decisions to locate anthropology in social science faculties. From the outside, social and or cultural anthropology seemed to fit but its senior practitioners asserted a vision of science at some distance from the way major anthropologists understood their discipline, this being more along the lines of the early Enlightenment view that I have discussed.

For example, both Kroeber and Evans-Pritchard were antagonistic to the location of social/cultural anthropology in the social sciences. Thus Kroeber writes (as late as 1959):

> Now maturity has stolen upon us...The times and utilitarianism have caught up with us, and we find ourselves classified and assigned to the social sciences. It is a dimmer atmosphere, with the smog of jargon hanging heavy. Generalisations no longer suffice, we are taught to worship Abstraction; sharp sensory outlines have melted into logico-verbal ones. As our daily bread, we invent hypotheses in order to test them, as we are told is the constant practice of the high tribe of physicists. If at times some of you, like myself, feel somewhat ill at ease in the house of social science, do not wonder; we are changelings therein; our true paternity lies elsewhere. (1959:211)

Evans-Pritchard (see 1951), oriented more to history (however, his classic study of the Nuer is redolent with thinly disguised reference to debates in Oxford at the time concerning relativity and quantum mechanics), was also opposed to anthropology being in social science. Paradoxically, perhaps, he was interested in Comte’s positivist sociology. Comte saw himself in the Enlightenment tradition of Descartes but felt that he had gone far beyond (thus mathematics or geometry was not at the foundation of his logic) and described his particular invention and vision of sociology as being the cornerstone of all science. The discomfort continues. Thus in France most recently (in January 2006) anthropologists reacted in anger and astonishment to the bureaucratic attempt to remove anthropology as a distinct disciplinary category for the purposes of funding and to redefine it as a subsidiary category within history. Pina-Cabral (2006: 668), in a just published comment on the event, has this to say—‘The ghost of positivism hangs over any discussion of the scientific nature of anthropological knowledge, paralysing us before the need to state explicitly that the knowledge we produce as anthropologists is not just any kind of
knowledge but a specific type: scientific knowledge’.

These reactions by anthropologists to views of their practice by those external to it, in the main administrators, underscore a widespread anthropological attitude that it is not only an autonomous and distinct knowledge practice but also that it is not reducible to other disciplines with which its practice often must intersect. Pina-Cabral asserts that anthropology (and his reference is to social and/or cultural anthropology) is a specific type of scientific knowledge but does not indicate what this may be concentrating, correctly in my view, on dismissing negative critiques that deny to anthropology the authority that is claimed. Thus he stresses that the critique largely internal to anthropology has made its evolutionist, primitivist, colonialist and essentialist associations matters of the past. He also emphasises its global dimensions over and against highly positioned understandings that still linger, for example, those which continue to define the orientation of anthropology from within European and North American contexts. However, Pina-Cabral does not discuss what he means by anthropology as a specific type of scientific knowledge, although he makes sharp and important reference to the presentist tendency in much contemporary anthropological critical discourse. The presentism that he criticises seeks a total reconfiguration of anthropology in relation to contemporary globalising circumstances which often involves a direct attack on previous anthropological approaches, so sidelifing them as to deny large bodies of ethnographic work which, regardless of its methodological pitfalls, still constitutes the important authority of anthropology and much of the significance of its contribution to knowledge.9

I do not criticise Pina-Cabral for avoiding a more precise attempt at defining what he means by anthropology as a specific type of science and in effect leaving the matter up in the air. However I think his usage of the concept of science is in accordance with the meaning I employ here: that is a rigorous knowledge practice, by and large non-positivist in orientation, that claims the knowledge it produces has a degree of validity which, like any scientific practice, is never beyond contestation or immune from radical doubt or scepticism. To arrive at a more definite delineation of the character of anthropology as a particular kind of science is extremely hazardous and is unlikely to avoid failure, especially given what I regard as the highly critical and variously positioned character of anthropological discourse.

It could be said that playing with the nature of what anthropology is has some similarity with attempting a definition of cultural or social identity. There is a tension towards describing it in terms of what it is not or in relational terms with a high sense of exclusivity. What identity might be in itself is always open and likely to be shifting, dependent on context or situation, achieving a degree of stability, perhaps, only at the level of abstraction—as in nationalism—and, like nationalism and most debates about identity, it is likely to provoke the passions. Part of this provocation rests in the fact that while human beings are individually certain in their identity—to play with Descartes, it is part of their experiencing consciousness and therefore indubitably the determination of their existence—it is always in some sense at risk. The point about the Cartesian question in this context—How do I know I exist?—is in the fact that there is no certainty outside the I, outside identity itself. This is productive of great anxiety if, as G. H. Mead (1934) wrote, the I cannot be objectified through external reference whereby it is both (re)produced and stabilised. Without such external objectification the I or identity disintegrates or is lost. Anthropologists know they are anthropologists (they identify themselves as such and are conscious of the fact in themselves) but this is difficult to demonstrate if there is nothing relatively distinct about their approach or subject matter (much of these are shared with other disciplines) independent of individual assertion whereby they can objectify themselves as anthropologists. I note this especially for the current historical context of

anthropology where many of the once relatively established bases for the definition of anthropology have been shot away (e.g. anthropology as the study of the Other, anthropology as the study of culture, anthropology as the ethnographic investigation of small-scale non-western populations, etc.).

Here is a major significance of Pina-Cabral’s complaint about a great tendency in anthropology, and with specific reference to teaching, to undervalue and even dismiss the extraordinary amount of work in anthropology that has been achieved. This not only gives to anthropology much of its authority but also its distinction, its identity.

At this point I wish to address Pina-Cabral’s assertion concerning the relatively distinct identity of anthropology as a science. I consider that the anthropological project achieves a distinction with regard to three orienting emphases that have taken increasing shape in the comparatively short history of its emergence. These are: a) an orientation to holism, or an exploration of particular human practices as situated within (and therefore only comprehensible within) larger encompassing complexities of practice and value; b) a specific empirical or ethnographic stress, in which a direct and immediate encounter with the phenomena in question is given paramount importance, and; c) an overarching concern with the diversity and logics of reason in idea and practice. None of these orientations is entirely independent of the other but I have isolated them as thematic strands in anthropology which together impart to anthropology much of its distinctive and, indeed, particular scientific quality.

**Anthropological holism**

By holism I mean the specific tendency in anthropology to explore the particularities of human action, practice and value within the embracing complexities of their specific and wider contexts inclusive of what may be considered as their cosmological and epistemological horizons. Anthropologists are concerned with the exploration of human action or practice and the attitudes and interpretations emergent within or apparently relevant to these within what may be described as their overall life-worlds. This holistic or totalising stance is condensed in the general anthropological definition of the subject as being concerned with the cultural and social formations and processes of human action. The concepts of culture and society are, in effect, shorthand terms (usually overlapping) for the heterogeneous domains of belief meaning, interpretational significance etc. (culture) and the formations, interactions, relations, structures, systems or processes of practice (society, the social, sociality) within which anthropological understanding develops. The historical discourse of their usage in anthropology concentrates around many issues involving, among others, their coherence, homogeneity, integrity, boundedness or horizontal limits. There has been a shift from relatively closed and determining conceptions to more open and contingent conceptions. A major problem relating to their usage that directs much anthropological discussion of the concepts of culture and society concerns the relation of Parts to Wholes, which is a discourse about totalisation. There is a turn in some contemporary anthropology to recognise notions of society and culture as unsatisfactory totalisations and to attempt their dismissal from the conceptual repertoire. While this may appear as an anti-totalising stance it is more a complaint about the restrictive nature of society and culture as totalisations. It is of some relevance, that those anthropologists who make such complaints are either concerned with the phenomenon of globalisation (a grand totalising concept if ever there is one) or are totalising at the level of the individual, perhaps confusing the Part for the Whole.

For all their contestation, the centrality of the concepts of culture and society in anthropology remain. This is so partly because of their totalising or all inclusive properties
and because they are by no means necessarily confining or restrictive. In most usages they are concepts that thoroughly underscore what anthropologists regard to be the distinct nature of human being. This is as a being that has reinvented itself as a cultural and social being, as such constrained to circumstances of its own making and directed towards horizons of action and experience constituted through these constructions.

The holistic or totalising orientation in anthropology, inherent in the anthropological definition of its concern to be primarily with the cultural and social constitution of, as well as constituting or constructive practices of, human being is integral to a strong anti-reductionist tendency. While there may be a move away from the cultural and the social as transcendent phenomena in a Durkheimian or neo-Kantian sense (although these continue as powerful), it is the cultural and social emphasis that draws anthropologists into critical discourse with other disciplines, especially in the social sciences (and to a degree in the humanities). The commanding anthropological imagination finds it difficult to conceive of anything concerned with human endeavour that lies outside of human constructional cultural and social processes. However much human beings may be concerned to bracket them out they are willy nilly implicated. Durkheim and a host of others more recently influential, if diversely, on anthropology—but I admit mainly modernists and infused with the liberating spirit of the Enlightenment—would support the social and value-creating nature of human being as encompassing or prior to any other kind of essentialist or foundationalist construction and understanding of human being. Thus anthropologists tend to be critically suspicious of orientations that might privilege economic human being, political human being, or individual psychological human being, to name only a few of the more common.10

As an aside, I submit that it is integral to anthropology as an Enlightenment discipline that it conceives of any suppression of the socio-cultural in human being to be a suppression of the humanity of human being. Thus, the assertion of the individual over and against the social, or of the economic and the political as also being prior to the social, is to be oppressive of humanity, notwithstanding the destructive potential of the socio-cultural in itself.

But to return to the point, phenomenologically it is in all probability difficult to disprove the foundational, a priori, socio-cultural conditionality of human being. My argument, then, is that anthropology is indeed concerned with the social and cultural being of human being and grasps this as being its raison d’etre. It does this also, I stress, in a holistic sense concerned with how the socio-cultural impinges on all areas of human action, endeavour or practice both as an emergent and as an overarching force.

Anthropology, largely as a function of its holistic orientation, is an open and not a closed discipline. This has been intensified by its internal critique of orientations that tended to undue closure such as that of structural-functionalism. This perspective (for it was a theoretical conception in only the loosest of senses), nonetheless and regardless of its well-known deficiencies, stressed the potential interconnection or interrelational dynamic or process of disparate events, ideas, practices. Such aspects were conceived as evident through a concentration on the social or the cultural. The orientation stressed that one aspect or element of ongoing life analytically abstracted out for inspection could not be separated from the rest. Although in retrospect crude, structural functionalism did indicate an anthropological stress on complexity, which is a vital implication of the holistic import of the social and cultural anthropological emphasis. The definite move to openness rather than closure in anthropology is not by any means contradictory of the holistic and totalising force of what I regard to be the distinction of the anthropological approach.11 In this way it excites a discipline that not only has a tendency to encompass other approaches but also to problematise their perspectives or theories within wider fields of complexity.
The notions of the social and the cultural operate both as indicators of such complexity and also open towards other understandings that more reductive approaches and disciplines may be motivated to ignore.

Anthropology as a property of its holism or totalising (which perhaps are made even more potent as a consequence of the antagonism to closure that has become integral within anthropological discourse) is given to engage seriously with the constructions, explanations and even methods from those across the range of the disciplines in the sciences and the humanities. Perhaps this is more so than many other disciplines that do not have the kind of history that I have described.

While anthropologists are often drawn within the realities of other disciplines, and brought to apply their assumptions and orientations, there is also a tension among anthropologists to resist them. This is not a concern to establish a distinct identity in a contested field but occasioned in the socio-cultural emphasis of the discipline. In so far as this is suppressed in other perspectives, anthropologists will be oriented to assert it: to expand an explanation or understanding so that it addresses the socio-cultural. This is a factor in the tendency of anthropologists widely to resist tendencies to reduction. The effect of this, I suggest, is occasionally not just to provide an alternative understanding but to force a revision, a readjustment of explanations or understandings grounded in the assumptions of other knowledge practices.

**Anthropology and the ethnographic imperative**

A major factor in the distinction of anthropology and what may be referred to as its scientific practice is the stress that anthropology places on the empirical, the ethnographic. Perhaps the single most important dimension of the anthropological ethnographic emphasis is the primacy given to the ethnographic over the conceptual, interpretational or the abstract-theoretical. The primacy of the ethnographic is such that anthropology is almost synonymous with ethnography. This anthropological insistence is born of the Enlightenment with its imperative that scientific knowledge is based on direct, unmediated, empirical engagement with the phenomena in question. Such a concern received further impetus in Newtonian physics and its success. Isaac Newton argued that science should not be based in any pre-judgement and, moreover, that the concepts and theories that it develops should be emergent in and through the phenomenon in itself. Thus metaphysics was to be abandoned.

Of course, scientists from Newton on come to their enquiries with preconceptions. Anthropologists have sometimes shown that the socio-cultural ground of their thought orients their practice and in a way that does not necessarily prevent understanding but is integral to their imaginative and intuitive creative processes. The point is used against the objectivism of scientific method especially when applied to the social world, drawing attention to a double risk: the failure to acknowledge the presence of socio-cultural preconceptions in a domain in which they are likely to be most at work, and the possibility that the full acknowledgment of such preconceptions may be a way into the achievement of further knowledge concerning the problem at hand. Here is an important dimension of the anthropological value placed on fieldwork ethnography. It is through the reflexive deconstruction of the anthropologist’s own preconceptions in the fieldwork encounter that knowledge is gained, not just of the fieldworker’s own taken-for-granted realities but also of those with whom the fieldworker engages—as a function of the encounter itself. It is through, or by means of, the surfacing of preconceptions or taken-for-granted attitudes in the conjunctural spaces of the fieldworking that ethnographers begin to enter with some depth into ethnographic realities.
This is not as antagonistic to a Newtonian objectivism as at first it may appear. Anthropologists largely accept that preconceptions—the doubts embedded in commonsense, in what Sahlins (1978) might refer to as practical reason—provide barriers to understanding. The anthropologist is always likely to be bound in personal metaphysics. In anthropology, the commonsense of the anthropologist cannot be suspended or easily bracketed as, perhaps, that of the scientist in a laboratory. The experience of fieldwork—the stress at least on a limited participation—potentially enables that which is embedded beneath reflective consciousness in the fieldworker to be thrown to the surface. As such reflexively realised cultural preconceptions or taken-for-granted attitudes are converted from being inhibitors of understanding to being facilitators.

There is a difference here from some representations of objectivist physical science. There the experiencing and sensing body of the scientific investigator is bracketed out or at least ideally or ideologically subordinated as a key instrument for the construction of knowledge. The reverse is the case for anthropology where the experiencing body and reflective consciousness of the anthropologist becomes the crucial scientific instrument. This does not make anthropology subjectivist and therefore non-scientific. Rather the embodied subjectivity or the experiencing and sensing body of the anthropologist is a key instrument for the establishment of objective knowledge. This is so, among other things, because ideally the anthropologist is placed in a critical situation of self-awareness and openness, which is an anthropological methodological emphasis. Furthermore, as a potential of this anthropological orientation, the ideal of radical doubt or scepticism, integral to the production of scientific or rigorous knowledge, is facilitated. But this is an ideal which, as I have intimated, exposes all forms of human reasoning and understanding to question—that of the investigator as well as that of those towards whom enquiry is being directed.

Newtonian objectivism, I mentioned, in its ideal expression is opposed to theoretical presuppositions no less than ordinary knowledge that asserts its truth independently of the evidence. What anthropology recognises in its fieldwork orientation, at least implicitly or naively (for Husserlian phenomenology sets out more systematically a similar logic for the achievement of a science of human being to which anthropologists have relatively recently become aware), is a method for achieving objective scientifically rigorous knowledge by means of subjective consciousness. Anthropological fieldwork extends or opens the possibility of using the powers of human reflexive consciousness; fieldwork is thus a critical deconstructive act regarding the processes whereby human beings construct or form their realities. This, I add, also involves an orientation to reality formation through sensory experience (those of the fieldworker as well as those among whom the fieldworker is placed). In the critical attitude of reflexive consciousness, the systematic interrogation of such experience becomes vital in the formation of objective knowledge.

I might observe here that the importance of experiential knowledge (including imaginal and intuitive) is far from outside the purview of the physical sciences and is acknowledged by them, indeed from Newton to the present day. This is particularly so if it operates within the circumstances of the phenomenon in question in which case it is thoroughly consistent with the dictum concerning the primacy of evidence. As an example, Newton argued that concept and theory should be formed through the phenomenon itself. Concept and theory is not merely contingent on the evidence, or entirely independent of the evidence to be tested by it, or necessarily outside preconception. Hence the test itself is potentially uncertain. The evidence or what is to be tested, if possible, must be intimately engaged with. Thus Feyerabend (1993), that wonderful critic of the positivism of Popper, famously castigated a panel of Nobel Laureates who had gathered to pronounce on the irrational unreason of astrology (incidentally, something about which Newton himself was
deeply fascinated). Feyerabend demonstrated (upon his questioning) that this group of celebrated scientists had not read a single text on astrology let alone immersed themselves in the phenomenon in order to arrive at their understanding and final judgement. In other words the Nobel Laureates had been thoroughly unscientific. Einstein, more famously, was inspired towards his first specific theory of relativity through his own experiential imagination while riding on a tram towards a clock in Zurich. In relation to this experience he began to imagine the motion of clock time relative to his own motion within time. (He describes his imaginative thoughts concerning what it would be like to travel alongside a particle of light.) There are countless other examples. I once had described to me by, perhaps, the foremost exponent of fluid mechanics, central to aircraft design, why he liked swimming in the strong currents off Malta. His reason was that water behaved exactly like air and in experiencing the complexity of its flow against his own body he could better operate the procedures of his mathematical consciousness. Sadly he drowned recently while swimming off Malta.

Many anthropologists do not do ethnographic fieldwork of the kind I have addressed here. Library-based ethnography is common. Nonetheless, the primacy of ethnography and, especially, the idea of fieldwork and the scientific possibility of the idea (in which, effectively, the subjective/objective opposition is collapsed) is vital in anthropology regardless of whether fieldwork is in-the-mud or on-the-street. I have discussed fieldwork as an idea critical to the scientific practice of anthropology as it is significant to the distinction of anthropology almost from the very birth of anthropology as a university discipline. The main instigators of modern anthropological method were Boas and especially, if arguably, Malinowski, who were trained in the physical sciences. Moreover, the development of the anthropological approach opens to possibility that which is already implicated in the natural sciences, certainly from fairly early in the Enlightenment, even if anthropology must establish a distinction because of its very subject matter, human being.

I am suggesting that even science is implicitly oriented against simple empiricism or positivist objectivism of the kind apparently copied but reinvented within many of the social sciences. These sometimes appear to cleave to an objectivism that is in excess of much scientific practice. Anthropology, I suggest, was given to counter such excess (and potentially to realise the contribution to rigorous understanding of subjective experience) once fieldwork became the cornerstone of its methodology. This may not have been the conscious intent of such a recommendation and may have been more the accidentally arrived at realisation born of the situations of fieldwork. My point is that the fieldwork ethnographic emphasis of anthropology (the importance of experiential embodied knowledge as integral to the anthropological fieldwork idea) creates anthropological ethnographic work as far more than merely the collection of ‘data’ or a technique for gathering information. These notions trivialise the importance of the very idea of ethnography and are common among those who are outside the discipline.

An important instance of such trivialisation is Anthony Giddens’ (1996) stated opinion concerning a reduced significance of anthropology because most social scientists these day do ethnography. While there are many who exemplify dimensions of the ethnographic objective, but who would not call themselves anthropologists, ethnography is not data or mere information. But in the view I express here it is simply not so that most social scientists, for example, do ethnographic fieldwork of the kind I have discussed. Anthropologists in the main engage in a critical dialogic relation with those in the realities which they enter. If it is simply ‘hanging out’ or ‘being there’, as some claim, this is in defiance of the anthropological idea.

I referred to anthropological ethnography as based on in-depth fieldwork. My usage of in-depth means that anthropological understanding is not necessarily dependent on a
specified duration of the long-term variety, although this is clearly relative to the problem at hand, but upon a full imaginative and intuitive embodied attempt to enter within the phenomenon in question. Furthermore, and to follow the Newtonian logic, the anthropological primacy of the ethnographic demands the representation of realities as completely as possible on their own terms but in a way that can conceivably transcend the restrictions of their own limitations or restrictions on understanding. One aspect of the anthropological approach is the conjunctural positioning of the anthropologist whereby an outside-in and inside-out orientation is adopted that is potentially radically decentering. That is, both internal and external conceptions are thrown into question as they are joined, critically, to the task of representation perhaps leading to understanding that breaks out of the confinements of either.

Anthropologists are aware that such an ideal is rarely, if ever, realised. However, it is an impetus in the production of anthropological knowledge. Here I underline the importance of the critical relation that anthropologists have to ethnography, which is manifest in their practice to continually return to their own ethnography and that of others (through fieldwork, through re-analysis, via comparison with other materials) and a marked tendency to be in continual debate with it. In a sense an ethnographic study is never completed and is always open to possibilities not even dreamed. It is always effectively alive and living, up-to-date; in fact, continually a potential source of new understanding. This is why the neglect of anthropological ethnography in the depth of its representation, the anthropology of the past as well as of the present, both in the teaching and in the practice of anthropology, risks the very fundamental basis of anthropological knowledge and of its authority as a particular type of science.

Anthropological ethnography is oriented to a totalising completeness. This is apparent in the monograph, still the main form of presentation of anthropological knowledge, though in decline as a function of market demand and the adoption of the so-called science publication model in a university world increasingly governed by productivity measures. The totalising, virtually exhaustive, orientation to ethnographic representation in anthropology is concerned with presenting the fullness of the circumstances in terms of which anthropologists arrive at their particular understandings. It is, of course, an impossibility but a direction in anthropology pioneered, among others, by Malinowski. There is a very Enlightenment air, almost of the French philosophers or encyclopaedists, about this anthropological objective. The attempt to present whole societies or complete worlds has been attacked from a number of stances, sometimes legitimate. Ferguson (2006) has recently reissued common anti-colonialist sentiments against the effort of anthropologists in Africa to present total ethnographic tribal accounts, as in Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer* (1940) or Victor Turner’s *Schism and Continuity in an African Tribe* (1957). No doubt the term tribe has powerful colonial connotations and is rarely used today but the accounts of these scholars hardly presented neat homogenised accounts as is sometimes supposed. But Ferguson misses, I think, a deeper point behind these kinds of ethnography. This is that they are concerned to present the singularity of the phenomena with which they engage in a modern philosophical sense. That is, anthropologists present in their ethnographies not just the context of their interpretations or theories but the fact that the worlds of their ethnographies are always more than, in excess of, any interpretation or theory that may be planted on them. Ultimately, as with anything else that human beings struggle to grasp, the phenomena in themselves escape final understanding or explanation and are independent of the chains of causation that the anthropologist or any other may place upon them. Such is acknowledged in the science of the Enlightenment, which asserted that ultimate knowledge was God’s alone. This is the recognition in science of its own limitation and is behind the urgency in the scientific imagination to ever challenge
and revise theoretical understanding. I think this is shared in the anthropological imagination, which is directed to press towards new horizons of knowledge and to open up to further potentials of explanation and understanding. The initial location of anthropological investigation at the fringes of Empire certainly drew its impetus from the interests of a political world legitimated in the Enlightenment, but it also transcended such beginnings for the horizons of anthropological knowledge are now anywhere and everywhere.

I have said that in anthropology there is a primacy of ethnography over theory. This is not to say that anthropologists are not interested in theory or have not developed theoretical understandings largely of their own— theories of exchange and reciprocity are noteworthy and entirely relevant to the socio-cultural emphasis of the discipline. But the emphasis on fieldwork ethnography, its totalising orientation, and the singularity of ethnography—I think the notion of singularity that I use here is preferable to notions of anthropological relativism—are major dimensions of anthropological work that place anthropologists in a critical relation to each other and, most importantly, place them in a relation of contestation to other forms of knowledge. 13 This is especially so, I suggest, in the context of those often highly theory-driven disciplines in the social sciences and with whom anthropological work is the most cognate. In effect, this is a major factor in the sense of autonomy as a discipline that most anthropologists have and creates a space for them that is outside that occupied by the social sciences and why anthropologists are occasionally uncomfortable with their location among or classification with them. Critically, however, the anthropological value placed on the primacy of ethnography creates much of the distinct value of the knowledge practice of anthropology in relation to a great diversity of disciplines, including those in the human sciences. Ethnography in anthropology is both the source of knowledge and the source of its decentering and deconstruction and well before these became acknowledged methods within philosophy and the humanities.

Two directions which I have discussed so far that contribute to the distinction of anthropology, its scientific specificity, concern the stress on totalisation and upon the ethnographic, the last being a special form of the empirical. The third and final distinction of anthropology is its overriding concern with Reason.

**Anthropology and the discourse of Reason and the subversion of dominance**

The issue of Reason is that which articulates and tends to dominate or underpin the questions that anthropologists ask. This has its beginnings in the late Victorian Enlightenment, at the high point of Empire where anthropology was explicitly directed towards a subject focus on those regions of human being, historically and contemporaneously, that in one form or another challenged Reason’s Rule. Moreover, anthropologists were oriented to explore other forms of reason, mainly at the imperial periphery, with the aim to demystify and demythologise such reason, liberate it from itself, as it were, through the demonstration of the powers of sceptical rationalism, the force in science. Anthropologists thoroughly acknowledge this as part of their own historical self-consciousness.

An anthropological commitment to a scientific rationalism persists, or what I call Dominant Reason, akin to that which sparked the Enlightenment. It does so in almost its high Victorian sense. Current globalising forces that celebrate, possibly more than before, the wonders of science and technology—attached, furthermore, to an imperialising globalisation—may correlate with a reappearance of a kind of Victorian rationalism
applied to the socio-cultural field of anthropology. Examples might be the growing importance of socio-biological interests within anthropology, despite fierce criticisms, and the recent return of rationalist efforts to explain religion, to demythologise it and to release its emotional hold over the mass mind.\textsuperscript{14}

Almost from the start of fieldwork anthropology, and probably because of it, there began to be a shift away from the foregoing kind of rationalism or, at least, the development of a criticism of its contradictions. These included the fact that Enlightenment rationalism was instrumental in generating the supposed irrationalism that it encountered and often fought to control. Such an anthropological move was integral to its role in what Adorno and Horkheimer (1997 [1944]) call the dialectic of Enlightenment. Further, anthropologists began to question some of the ruling tenets of Enlightenment dominant Reason, its internal limitations and its failure as a mode of critical understanding. Moreover, there was an early awareness that other forms of reason, outside that of Dominant Enlightenment Reason, either exposed the faults in such reason or were not reducible to its terms as well as challenging its premises. There are numerous examples.

Thus, Evans-Pritchard’s classic \textit{Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande} (1937) is a landmark study of the internal limitations of Reason. He demonstrates witchcraft as effectively the obsession with reason, of explanation and meaning carried to its furthest extreme whereby it reveals reason in its ultimate absurdity. Reason in witchcraft exposes Reason as the logic of consciousness against itself, caught in a spiral of almost endless reduction. Although Evans-Pritchard conceives of Azande witchcraft as different from other forms (European witchcraft, for instance), it has an underlying unity in the logic of its processes and, as Polanyi (1962) and others expanded, with much scientific practice which cannot break free from the circle of its own reasoning. The absurdity of reason in the extreme that Evans-Pritchard addresses is acknowledged in this regard by Taussig (1991) in his explorations of the illogicality of Reason, more specifically Enlightenment Reason, at the imperial peripheries. Marshall Sahlins (1978, 1995), in many ways the anthropologist who addresses Enlightenment Reason the most thoroughly and with particular concern as to its dominance in the practical reason of modernity, reveals the impossibilities of its understandings both at the conjunctures of the political spread of the Enlightenment and, in his powerful implication, in its infusion within the various social sciences, including anthropology. Louis Dumont (1977, 1996), perhaps, goes more deeply in his critique than Sahlins, indicating that the ethnographically distorting practical reason of the Enlightenment is persistent or ideologically ingrained in certain anthropological orientations that purport to escape it.

Dumont’s critique of Levi-Straussian structuralism is that the latter’s structuralist method, its oppositional dualism, is deeply embedded in Enlightenment thought and extends the possibility of reproducing as a generality what is historically and ontically specific. Levi-Strauss, in Dumont’s view, submits himself too uncritically to an Enlightenment orientation that is thoroughly grounded in the individualism of modernity and which can distort both representation and understanding. This is somewhat ironic for it is Levi-Strauss who sets himself up as being against certain expressions of Enlightenment thought such as Sartrean existentialism. He accuses, in \textit{Mythologiques} (Levi-Strauss 1981:640), existentialists of blowing rings of metaphysical smoke in the air while seated at some \textit{Café du Commerce}. Dumont’s point is that Levi-Strauss is nevertheless bound in the world of Enlightenment Reason and in the dualisms that its emphasis on a particular Reason and the individualism of modernity produces. Effectively, as Dumont underlines, Levi-Strauss and others (sometimes postmoderns who are critical of Levi-Straussian structuralism) commit various reasonings to forms of conceptualisation that are not only thoroughly European or Western but can lead to a gross distortion of the dynamics or
processes of such realities. In other words they are bound in a cultural and historical metaphysics that may continue to block understanding.

Dumont effectively offers a critique of the very Enlightenment foundations of anthropology (which has some correspondence with Husserl’s (1970) *The Crisis of the European Sciences*) as they are expressed in Levi-Strauss and also apparent in some postmodern anthropology that he says identifies the nature of culture and cultural difference through a similar logic of individualism—perhaps late individualism. For Dumont, anthropological visions of cultural difference are often constituted from within the position of individualism as value that become further compounded in notions of diversity and hybridity in the synecdoche whereby the parts constitute the whole. Difference of a certain kind becomes universal: the Enlightenment of a distinct Western kind rears its head and potentially oppressively so.

In a critical way, Dumont is still with Enlightenment science, for he recommends what I have discussed previously which is to engage an analytical, conceptual and theoretical scheme that is internally consistent with or organic with the phenomenon in question. Also still within Enlightenment terms, but possibly more productively so, is that anthropological strategy of the radical suspension of disbelief, a form of bracketing extending from a critique of Descartes. This involves bracketing out preconceptions concerning phenomena without necessarily taking on the beliefs or reasoning attached to the phenomena in question. The principle of Descartes’ radical scepticism is sustained but addressed to all reason, those within the centre or at the peripheries. It does not use another form of reasoning outside Dominant Reason as a method for being sceptical of it or for exposing its particular restrictions on explanation and understanding as in much anthropological relativism (a strategy of simple negation) or in the more complex orientations of Levi-Strauss, Sahlins and Dumont who are in their different ways anti-relativist. The type of suspension of disbelief I am talking about is a kind of sidestepping of the whole issue of Reason and giving authority to practices in and of themselves no matter what manner of reasoning is attached to them (see Kapferer 2002).

Major examples of this sort of anthropological strategy I am thinking of here include the work of Steven Feld in *Sound and Sentiment* (1990) and especially Steven Friedson’s work, *Dancing Prophets* (1996). This last work, by taking a particular practice seriously, discovers a musical and sound phenomenon that while produced within a specific culture of reason (outside that of Dominant Reason) has universal import. Friedson shows how drumming patterns, developed in the trance-dancing of Tumbuka healers in Malawi as a function of the intersection of the sounds of different cross-rhythms upon the bodies of trance-healers, produce a systematic musical illusion. This manifests as a specific kind of physical effect (that can be recreated independently of any cultural context) that, nonetheless, parallel completely cultural explications of them as being spirits that enter the body and move around inside it.

Overall then, I consider that anthropology, focussed on the socio-cultural domain, finds much of its scientific distinction in the exploration of the problematics of reason. Anthropology might be conceived of as Reason’s Doubt. It addresses the problematics in all forms of reasoning and not merely those flowing from Enlightenment sceptical rationalism. Anthropologists do so both through the application of such rationalism and in direct contestation with it, often by demonstrating other forms of practiced reason and their potencies in understanding. The perennial struggle within anthropology between universalists and relativists, the endless debates revolving around concepts, modes of representation, and much else, have always been with the discipline and reflect the conundrums involved in the pursuit of knowledge through all kinds of reason.

An anarchic spirit might describe anthropology, and this may be integral to the
potentiality of its contribution across the knowledge practices. By anarchy here I refer to a tension to resist tendencies to over-determination in theory, perspective, or the rules of practice. Anthropology might be characterised by a high degree of eclecticism, perhaps it encourages it—putting a diversity of opinions and theories into play, as it were, and exposing them to the authority and contingency of ethnography. But the chief anarchic dimension of anthropology, taken as a whole and in the manifold diversity of its practices, is in its capacity to step outside the dictates of any particular reason, or to confound one kind of reason with the possibilities of another. Anthropology in its dynamic potentially opens out to possibility while other disciplines that surround it tend to a closure, either through the teleology of their theories or the teleologies of the particular realities to which they are bound.

**Anthropology and the Enlightenment: a Nietzschean return?**

My argument as a whole is that anthropology, thoroughly directed to the socio-cultural, discovers its scientific distinction in what I have referred to as three major features: a) the totalising orientation of anthropology in which all aspects of human endeavour are potentially drawn within its gaze; b) anthropology’s ethnographic emphasis, as a special kind of the empirical both oriented to the singularity of ethnographic contexts and the primacy of ethnography over external concept and theory, and; c) the problematic of reason as the central articulating concern of the discipline.

A major implication is that a weakening of any one of these, all of which are in interrelation, may threaten not just the distinction of anthropology but also the value of its contribution across the range of the sciences and the humanities. Anthropology is already under threat by forces that are largely independent of anything its practitioners can do. Among the more important are the changes that are overtaking the universities. The managerialisation of university administration and an economic pragmatism fuelled in global processes have to a major extent disempowered academic staff, subordinating them to logics largely beyond their control. Anthropologists as much as other academics are forced to adapt to new frameworks of funding, performance indicators—the exigencies of the audit culture as Marilyn Strathern (2000) has examined. These can dramatically affect anthropology for it alters, for example, the way anthropologists present their research. There is a shift from the monograph, where ethnographic singularity is demonstrated, to the scientific article in which such singularity is less apparent and which is likely to give theory and concept primacy over the ethnographic. The popularity in anthropology of the edited volume over the monograph is very evident. The demand for self-funding has not only led to an increasing commoditisation of anthropological ethnographic work but also to its devaluation to just data or information or simply to generalisation for ease of consumption in which ethnographic work may be of virtually no import at all, merely given lip service.

There have also been other challenges to anthropology, at least in the way I have attempted to conceive of it here. These have come from within, although they are certainly affected by what are seen to be globalisation processes. Pina-Cabral (2006), who I referred to earlier, is concerned with the presentism of some anthropologists interested in reconfiguring the discipline whereby the authority of earlier work is disregarded. The effects of the reconfiguration that concern me involve a turning away from the ethnographic, as I have discussed it, to a stress on superficiality in accordance with the mobility and speed and boundary transgression of the postmodern, as Baudrillard critically addresses it. This is compounded by a tendency to consciously privilege external concept and perspective over ethnography, inverting a relation that is crucial to the import of
anthropology. Diversity and hybridity have become mantras, with all the magicality that these possess, assuming a significance similar to that of the much pilloried structural-functionalism and its notion of system integration of yesteryear. In certain senses, which I have explored elsewhere (Kapferer 2001), there is a correspondence between recent anthropological recommendations and the very imperialism that lies behind so much current globalisation. In their presentism anthropologists risk unconsciously reflecting dominant and oppressive attitudes of which the same anthropologists have been sharply critical in the past.

The aim of some of the presentist critiques of anthropology is to explode some of anthropology’s own myths—actually the ideals that are vital to its motivating energy even if not by any means realised in practice—and, perhaps most of all, to decenter it. I think the dynamic of the discipline is already one of decentering and is virtually a dimension of its distinction. In fact many of the critics of the presentist kind are systematic with such a dynamic, perhaps themselves produced out of it. The irony, however, is that in their decentering they risk centering it, bringing it firmly within the terms of similar discourse in the metropolitan heartlands of globalising, imperial processes. Anthropology, through its ethnography and through its critiques of reason as manifested in the variety of knowledge practices that it faces and with which it often contends, offers the possibility of decentering from positions outside the centres of dominant discourse no matter how radical.

The most important contemporary development within anthropology has been what might be regarded as the rejection of its Enlightenment project. A feature of this has been a turning away from the idea of anthropology as an Enlightenment science as I have discussed it. This has effectively accepted the division between the sciences and the humanities that anthropology in many ways resists. The pangolin is being killed and a new humanism is being declared with a concern for the literary and the poetic. Rather than being used as imaginal and intuitive methods into understanding the complexity of human being, some anthropologists are given over to these things as a kind of narcissistic pleasure in themselves—anthropology being reinvented as a mockery of those writers, poets and artists whose creative energy they wish to emulate.

Geertz is often presented as the prophet of this shift. Indeed he writes of anthropology as a kind of Renaissance discipline or as one that should be reborn along its lines: anthropology to be oriented towards humanism and to part company from its Enlightenment beginnings. Certainly the Renaissance was an exciting moment in which the sciences and the arts were still bound and had not yet realised a nascent opposition. However, as Foucault (1984) points out, the Renaissance was still dominated by theology and by human being who bowed to God’s authority and not to that of human being alone. It is the world of the Renaissance that refused Copernicus and Galileo and demanded that they retract. It was the world of the auto da fe. The Renaissance manifests a humanism in which human being is yet restrained from liberating itself, which is the positive dimension of the Enlightenment that Foucault recognises. Foucault is not interested in returning to the humanism of the Renaissance sort, and which the Enlightenment opposed in its ethos. Rather, Foucault favours an approach that still bears the traces of the Enlightenment but that is shorn of its positivism and its overdetermined universalism. Not concerned with being for or against the Enlightenment, Foucault refers to the blackmail of the Enlightenment (could any of us really be against liberty?); he stresses the Enlightenment as an ethos, an attitude of critique that addresses the limits that are placed on human being and a concern with the possibilities that may take human beings beyond these limits.

This is close to what I mean by anthropology as an Enlightenment project. I see anthropology as an ongoing critique of the limits placed on humanity by itself and as an exploration of the possibilities of going beyond these limitations through the examination
of concrete practices in the ethnographic depth of their unfolding. For Adorno and Horkheimer the Enlightenment project ultimately betrayed its own ideals. Its Reason became an abstraction divorced from experience to be reinvented as a mythos restricting knowledge and engaged to human destruction rather than liberation. Moreover, the generative spirit of scientific scepticism and radical doubt when turned to the understanding of the human situation in all its diversity too easily became transmuted into a cynical instrument for the expansion and reproduction of oppressive power.

What Adorno and Horkheimer attacked for yesteryear has for some continued, if in a different vein, and with Enlightenment ideals (and the numerous political ideologies that they spawned) largely abandoned. The forces of inequality (and often, too, of prejudice occasionally still clothed in Enlightenment rags as in some appeals to democracy and individual freedom) have gained renewed energy aided sometimes by a revaluation of them. Thus as Will Hutton (2006) suggests a decline in Enlightenment ideals has given even greater play to the very processes that many would once have seen to be the enemies of equality and social justice. There has been the emergence of a degree of triumphalism among the politically and economically dominant that perhaps lacks the critical self-consciousness that was a potential of thought fuelled in Enlightenment ideals and that found a particular intensity in anthropology, sometimes in spite of the particular commitments of its practitioners. Anthropology, I have claimed, while an Enlightenment discipline established an internal critique that achieved for it a specific contribution of considerable value across those other diverse knowledge practices directed to an understanding of the situations of human being. This is under threat the more anthropology is denied its critical and reflexive externality in contemporary processes of intellectual and institutional domestication whereby it is progressively shorn of dimensions of its distinction both in ideal and practice.

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Notes

1. Evens and Handelman (2006: 7) make the observation that contemporary anthropology in North America is often unaware of the full implications of its location within the context of expansionist power. Anthropologists in this arena, while frequently outstandingly critical of developments around them, are often oblivious to criticisms in anthropology emergent in different political contexts. Not only do they assert the preeminence of their conceptual orientations but they are sometimes blind to the fact that these embed notions that are thoroughly born of their political situation—in other words, are hegemonic. Thus the postmodern tendency in anthropology that stresses individual agency and liberation from doctrines of structural constraint and order, in effect the state modernism of the earlier generation of anthropology, is by no means completely ideologically independent of new imperial directions largely spearheaded by contemporary US political policies.

2. Montesquieu marks in every way an early expression of what may be called the anthropological attitude, both in his emphasis on social and ideational processes and, even if fictionally, an
interest in comparison. His *Persian Letters* (2004 [1721]) is a brilliant critical exploration of French society through the eyes of princely visitors from Persia.

3. Voltaire has a wonderful reaction to a critique of his History of Charles XII by the Swedish Chaplain Nordberg who made some criticisms regarding facts. Voltaire writes in his reply to Nordberg:

   It is perhaps an important matter for Europe that one knows that the chapel of the castle of Stockholm, which burned down fifty years ago, was situated in the new northern wing of the palace...and that on days when sermons were preached the seats were covered with blue tapestry, that some of the seats were of oak, others of walnut...We are quite willing to believe that it is of the utmost importance to be thoroughly informed that there was no counterfeit gold in the dais under which Charles XII was crowned and to know the width of the canopy and whether it was decked with red or blue cloth provided by the church. All this may have its value for those who desire to learn the interests of princes...A historian has many duties. Allow me to remind you here of two which are of some importance. The first is not to slander; the second is not to bore. I can excuse you for neglect of the first because few will read your work; I cannot, however, forgive you for neglecting the second, for I was forced to read you. (cited in Cassirer 1951[1932]: 223)

4. Adorno and Horkheimer wrote their work in the context of Nazism, which had revealed the base possibility of the Enlightenment. They demonstrated how the ideals of the Enlightenment became calcified as a mythos of its own which subverted its anti-mythological or anti-mystifying impetus. Adorno and Horkheimer attacked the reduction of Enlightenment ideals into a kind of instrumental rationalism oriented to control and domination, the very antitheses of its promise.

5. A key aim of both Deleuze and Guattari is to define major lines of distinction in knowledge production between the arts, philosophies and sciences. They are concerned to outline areas of cross-pollination and complementarity that asserts no hierarchy between diverse disciplinary approaches to the nature of existence. I note here that a hostility to science among some in the philosophies and arts in effect asserts hierarchy in knowledge in the very act of attempting to deny it.

6. The American approach may have exacerbated the humanities/science tension within anthropology. That is, rather than facilitate a union in fact it excited an opposition. A recent polarising conflict between a science-oriented biological and pre-historical anthropology, on the one hand, and cultural anthropology, on the other hand, is one example. But elsewhere, although the tensions are no doubt there, the four fields structure encouraged a more holistic approach to the general exploration of the nature of human being than, perhaps, elsewhere. In a sense, I hazard, the development of anthropology in North America was more strongly in line with Enlightenment sentiments. The emergence of strong opposition between the science and humanity sides of anthropology, I consider, receives a heightening in the postmodern, literary turn in North American anthropology.

7. The reference here is to the wonderful discussion of the pangolin in Lele cosmology by Mary Douglas (2002 [1966]), an animal that crosses categories not only for the Lele but quite widely among peoples in central and southern Africa.

8. I note the possible importance of Comte in this regard. Unlike Durkheim, upon whom Comte had major influence, he was not so much interested in creating a sociology in the image of science (the source of much of the positivist criticism directed at Durkheim) as inventing sociology as a science on its own terms, a positivism undoubtedly, but not a positivism that was founded in the physical sciences. Here I add that Husserlian phenomenology, similarly, can be regarded as a positivist discipline but one that is not reducible to that of the physical sciences.

9. My argument here is to some extent biased towards a cumulative approach to knowledge—that is older work is not necessarily obviated by the more recent, although changes in paradigms (see Kuhn 1996) must involve its reevaluation. This is particularly so as much anthropological monographic knowledge records details of social and customary practices that are no longer extant, often being obliterated in globalising processes. Here, I must stress, I am not putting forward an argument for antiquarianism. Rather I maintain that these records contain valuable
information regarding human creative possibility that must continually be reconsidered in an anthropological quest which is oriented to a general understanding of human potential and which does not wish to be confined in the circumstances and dictates of the moment. The ethnographies of the past are not merely of historical interest but raise important questions of continuing relevance for the conceptual and theoretical understanding of human constructive processes and possibility. Current presentist emphases in anthropology can encourage an ignorance of earlier work thereby not only threatening the building of anthropological knowledge but also facilitating a repetition of kinds of knowledge or interpretation that have already been pursued, sometimes complete with the analytical faults of which earlier generations of anthropologists had already been well-aware. In effect, anthropological presentism of contemporary varieties can condemn anthropology to a treadmill of continually reinventing arguments of the past as if they were somehow completely new and original. This is so with some of the current individualist trends that appear to be oblivious to earlier criticisms (see Kapferer 2005). Moreover, methodologically there are questions concerning whether contemporary globalising processes always demand the kind of overall alteration of perspective suggested by some. As Sidney Mintz (1998; also Kapferer 2000) has shown, migration and transnationalism, for example, are long-term trends of which earlier generations of anthropologists were well-aware, many of whom had already addressed and effectively criticised more static approaches (e.g. Gluckman’s Manchester School). Mintz’s larger point is that in anthropology there were many frameworks of interpretation already engaged, which were not exclusive to the subject (as now), and their importance continues in a way that does not necessarily demand a reformulation of the subject. Indeed, such a reformulation smacks of a conformism that, I think, is anathema to anthropology or what I refer to later as its anarchic spirit.

10. It should be apparent here that in my view the stress by anthropologists on the social and the cultural is effectively anti-essentialist and avoids the essentialism that is the flaw in many reductionisms concerning the nature of human being.

11. Max Gluckman and others in his so-called Manchester School in their early critical approach to structural functionalism demonstrated a totalising perspective that was not closed. Paradoxically, perhaps, Gluckman and his colleagues attempted to demonstrate the power of analytically relatively closed conceptual constructions in understanding empirical realities that were nothing other than fluid and open. By implication the potency of holistic concepts that indicated closure (such as system or structure) was in the recognition that they did not constitute empirical reality but were merely tools for entering within complexity. The analytical slippage whereby the construct was confused with reality was grasped as both empirically and theoretically disastrous and constituted Gluckman’s initial critique of structural functionalist perspectives (see Evens and Handelman 2006; Kapferer 2006).

12. I might add that a separation of data from analysis that is becoming increasingly apparent in anthropological publication is an erring, in my view, in the direction of scientific positivism. Such a scientific model is being encouraged in the new managerialism of universities and their transformation in the context of neoliberalism.

13. On singularity see Deleuze 1994, Delanda 2002 and Badiou 2005. The notion of singularity emphasises non-reducible complexity and, more importantly, in this context, the impossibility of relativist comparison in anthropology. The realities that anthropologists encounter are unique in their complex specificities. They cannot be compared or contrasted in themselves but only through the mediation of abstract conceptualisations that in themselves must be constantly and rigorously evaluated.


15. Here I suggest that Dumont expresses a similarity with certain phenomenological approaches, specifically that of Edmund Husserl, which are concerned to develop a science of human being that is appropriate to the way human beings perceive and conceive their realities.
References


