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What is This?
Anthropology as Reality Show and as Co-production

Internal Relations between Theory and Activism

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Abstract ■ A conjunction of forces associated with globalization has contributed to changes in the world studied by anthropology as well as changes in anthropology itself. Both critical theoretical analysis and pragmatic activism are called for to address these changes and support the struggles of those with whom anthropologists work for rights, economic progress and social and cultural autonomy. Activism in this context has important contributions to make to theoretical understanding, just as critical theoretical understanding can clarify the sources and relationships of new ideological formations within anthropology with the real world they seek to explain.

Keywords ■ activism ■ anthropological theory ■ ethics ■ Kayapo ■ Marx ■ rights

Anthropology has historically developed as a discipline concerned with other peoples’ realities – the more different from our own, the better. It has been less interested, and less successful, in dealing with the ways its own reality – its activities, values and ideas – is affected by the contemporary world of which it is part. The proposition that not only ethnographic and theoretical understanding of the cultures, political practices and social institutions of free-ranging Others, but also the terms and theories through which that quest is conducted, are ultimately inseparable from the ways anthropologists engage with their world, and historical developments within that world, might seem a truism, but is in fact a ground of bitter contention among anthropologists themselves (I speak specifically of those belonging to the American Anthropological Association [AAA], although the same applies in varying degrees elsewhere). The disagreements to which I refer have focused in recent years around anthropological involvement in issues of ethics, human rights and activism in support of research subjects, above all indigenous peoples. Some have maintained that such involvements are incompatible with the mission of anthropology as an objective science. Others, among whom I would include myself, have maintained that it has been precisely through such engagements that anthropologists have managed to achieve a measure of understanding of changes in the nature and meaning of the cultures, social identities and political mobilization of the peoples they have been studying. As our research
subjects increasingly engage in struggles for rights, economic development and relative social and cultural autonomy, participation in those struggles in some activist capacity becomes both ethically imperative and methodologically the most powerful way of gaining ethnographic access and theoretical understanding of their reality.

These issues are as old as the discipline itself, but, as anthropology has grown in size, public influence and institutional power, and recent historical changes have brought changes in its relations to its research subjects and therefore also to itself, the issues have taken on new forms and urgency. One of the things that has happened is that history has caught up with anthropology once again. The unstated but pervasive assumption was that anthropologists came to the peoples they studied as ambassadors from a world of historical progress, a culture moving from a past to a future, to peoples and cultures who had neither a significant historical past nor a future as themselves has been overtaken by events, starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many of the indigenous peoples who once comprised the more or less passive subjects of anthropological research and theorizing became self-conscious historical actors, aggressive partisans of their own cultural and social autonomy. Meanwhile, anthropologists found themselves challenged by multiculturalist movements and identity politics within their own societies (Turner, 1993, 1999a, 2002a).

Beginning in the late 1960s, then, world-historic events shook the foundations of academia in general and challenged anthropology’s relations with those who had served as its prototypical research subjects. Anthropologists should have spent more intellectual energy than they have done seeking to understand what happened and how it affected their discipline and its subjects. The collapse of the world economic system based on the Bretton Woods accord gave rise to an intensified expansion of transnational capital beyond the control of any state. A major purpose of the Bretton Woods system had been to enable nation-states to continue to function as the dominant units of the world economy, able to prevent finance capital from becoming an autonomous global force that could subvert their political and economic control of their own monetary and social policies. When states lost this control they were increasingly obliged to adjust their policies to suit the needs of transnational capital. These needs included non-inflationary monetary policies and correspondingly diminished budgets for social expenses. This in turn tended to undermine the political and ideological meaning of popular sovereignty. This meant weakening the identification of governments and citizens, or in so many words, the partial de-hyphenation of nation-states. One result of this was that those who controlled state power tended increasingly to identify themselves and the policies of the regimes they led with the economic requirements of the global system. Accordingly, they tended to look upon the demands of the economically less productive classes of their own populations, and the governmental programs designed to serve them, as the
political and ideological enemies of the state regimes they controlled. The ideological result has been that throughout the First World the framework of social and historical consciousness that had prevailed since the 17th century – the idea of progress with its vision of history as a linear development from feudal disorganization to the centralized, socially homogeneous nation-state as the culmination of history – has been undergoing a paradigm shift (Turner, 2003a).

Another concomitant of the globalization process has been that the ideological identification of the centralization of power in the state with the homogenization of social and cultural differences, a fundamental heritage of the democratic revolutions of the 18th century to the modern state, has been undermined by the redistribution of specific powers and aspects of sovereignty from states to an increasing number of international regulatory bodies. This has meant the further attenuation of the formally egalitarian political institutions of popular sovereignty, such as electoral politics, that had served as channels for the identification of national populations, as citizens, with their governments and the collective state identities they represented. These changes, I have suggested, are contributing to a paradigm shift in the forms of social space-time (or ‘chronotope’, to borrow a term from M. Bakhtin) associated with the idea of progress and the hegemony of the modern nation-state. The chronotope associated with the rise of the modern state combined a concept of history in terms of linear diachrony with the nationalist ideal of society as a uniform multitude of citizens united in relation to a unique center, the sovereign state. The changes brought by globalization, I suggest, are re-framing this cultural chronotope as one of ‘synchronic pluralism’, in which there is neither a direction of historical time towards the creation of culturally homogeneous national societies nor states identified as unique centers of sovereignty. This is the chronotope associated with the new social movements based on ethnicity, feminism and multiculturalism. Among these new movements, the world-wide surge of indigenous struggles for cultural and social autonomy, political recognition and territorial rights since the end of the 1960s has played a prominent part (Turner, 2002a, 2003a, 2003b, 2004).

Anthropology has been directly affected by these global transformations, as well as influenced by their effects upon the modern nation-states within which it developed and in whose academic establishments it flourished. The dominant theoretical paradigms of pre-1970s anthropology, structural-functionalism, Boasian cultural idealism, cultural evolutionism, early applied anthropology, some forms of psychological anthropology, Lévi-Straussian structuralism and structural Marxism, were among the ‘canonical’ ideas challenged by the radical ferment that accompanied the paradigm shift in the universities. Many of their successors, such as the various species of post-structuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism and post-Marxism, have exemplified many of the features of the new chronotope I have called ‘synchronic pluralism’. Most of these tendencies have
sought to define themselves by attacking the forms of anthropology associated with the preceding chronotope. Their failure to carry out an adequate critical analysis of the historical conditions of the rejection of the paradigms they replaced, or the emergence of their own principal assumptions, however, has been associated, for many of them, with a tendency to throw out the baby with the bath water, thus failing to build on the strengths of previous work while avoiding its shortcomings, and destroying the sense of cumulative development that is essential to the life of any scientific discipline. As a result, in a number of cases new theoretical work has shown a tendency to define itself by inverting the terms of previous paradigms, attempting to make virtues of their vices but repeating the same fundamental problems in altered forms.

A corollary of the ideological repudiation of the ideal of integral national societies with homogeneous cultural identities in favor of pluralistic arrays of identity groups distinguished by cultural differences has been the widespread tendency to reject the conception of social systems or structures – or even that of ‘society’ tout court – in favor of individualistic approaches to social analysis based on rational choice, marginal utility, psychology or genetically inherited behavioral patterns. In this perspective, Neo-Darwinian approaches such as sociobiology or ‘evolutionary psychology’ betray their essential kinship with the postmodern cultural approaches they purport to despise. Both extremes of this continuum of reactionary ideological expressions stand in need of critical analysis as products of the very systematic political-economic, social and cultural forces they claim to supplant or transcend.

The upheaval caused by the paradigm shift, or, in the terms I have used, the transformation of the dominant chronotope of modern social consciousness, has in some ways exacerbated the centrifugal tensions of the discipline, but has also had important positive results for anthropology. The dilution of the ideal of the nation-state as a culturally, and as far as possible ethnically homogeneous whole, and its replacement by synchronic cultural pluralism with multiculturalism and identity politics as its main ideological expressions, meant that ‘culture’ and cultural difference took on new political meanings for many groups. Rather than a passive, historically inert attribute, as it had been regarded in much received anthropological thinking, culture came to be conceived of and actively manipulated by many groups as a political resource. The ethnic racial and cultural differences that had until recently been stigmata of inequality became transformed, in the new chronotope, into bases for claims of equality. These claims tended increasingly to be couched in universalistic terms of human rights and ethical imperatives rather than the laws of states. Peoples whose cultures anthropologists had objectified and analyzed as their own professional prerogative now asserted their own versions of their ‘cultures’, often borrowing the anthropologists’ terms for a concept they had not previously objectified in analogous terms in their own languages.
Anthropologists often reacted ambivalently, noting that ‘culture’ and cultural difference was now being defined by the new indigenous movements in ways that differed from the ‘traditional’ forms of the same cultures as recorded by anthropologists. Many anthropologists felt, however, that they and their discipline could not remain on the sidelines, shaking their fingers and muttering ‘Inauthentic!’ as their erstwhile subjects struggled to exploit the new historical opportunities afforded by culturally pluralistic societies, often making use of concepts and values borrowed from their own discipline. As the struggles of indigenous peoples and other cultural and ethnic minorities for rights, political equality and cultural autonomy assumed the proportions of a major cultural phenomenon in its own right, the line between participant observation and activist participation became increasingly difficult (or perhaps irrelevant) to draw (Turner, 1991b).

At the same time, the efforts of the US government to employ anthropologists in clandestine research in aid of its wars against Third World peoples in Southeast Asia and elsewhere led to intense pressure by politically concerned anthropologists to spell out more clearly in general terms the ethical constraints governing what professional anthropologists can and cannot do in the conduct of research. The result of this conjuncture of historical forces in the 1970s and 1980s was that issues of ethics, the anthropological basis of and responsibility for human rights, and activism by anthropologists on behalf of peoples among whom they do research became foci of intense theoretical interest and political debate. Standing committees on ethics and human rights were formed, and ad hoc bodies were appointed to deal with specific issues of rights and ethically fraught questions like that of clandestine research and the activities of researchers among the Yanomami.

In the fields of both ethics and rights, however, intense opposition to the application of general principles set out in the AAA’s official Code of Ethics or the statement on anthropology and human rights to the actions of individual members has led to periodic conflicts and reversals of policy. The question of the compatibility of clandestine research with anthropological professional ethics is one context in which such conflicts and reversals have occurred. The Ethics Committee began by formulating a set of ‘Rules of Professional Responsibility’ and applying them to specific cases of actions by anthropological researchers and teachers, but was forced by concerns over the potential divisiveness of actions on individual cases and fears of legal complications to retreat from this policy to the more anodyne mission of ‘education’. Another controversial issue has been the attempt to formulate a specifically anthropological basis for human rights, to work out how it might be reconciled with the claims of cultural relativity, and to create an institutional framework for active support of rights in specific cases by the professional association. The long-sputtering scandal over the ethics of anthropological research on the Yanomami, and the reluctant and ambivalent response by the profession and the AAA, has been, and
continues to be, a flash-point of controversy for a relatively small minority of members, and the occasion of massive indifference for the majority (Turner, 2002e, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). The crisis precipitated by the hotel workers’ strike at the Hilton hotel that had been reserved as the site of the 2004 Annual Meeting, in which the leadership put off a decision until it was clear that a substantial proportion of the membership would not cross a picket line, and the leadership compromised by convening an ill-attended substitute meeting at another hotel of the same chain with the same anti-union policies (but no strike), may be recognized as another, if more limited case in the same category. All of these cases called upon both leaders and members of the AAA to take positions and participate in decision-making, or at least gave them the opportunity to do so.

Analogous developments have occurred in connection with anthropological activism and applied anthropology. Activists have found themselves facing questions of what they are ultimately fighting for and how their activities may affect different groups within the communities in which they act. Many applied anthropologists have shifted the goals of their projects from increasing disposable capital or productive capacity in communities to attempting to increase, or at least to balance, the growth in empowerment of relatively disenfranchised groups within the community, such as women and junior men, rather than simply increasing the wealth and control over resources of the dominant group (e.g. senior men) in the received political system (Turner, 1995a). Speaking for myself, my early attempts to deal with dilemmas of activism such as the recognition that indigenous social systems were oppressive and exploitative towards some of their own members, and that some attempts of national governments to force changes upon them that might alleviate these egregious inequalities were therefore by some standards (which?) justified led me to my first attempt to adapt Marxian value theory to the analysis of non-capitalist societies (Turner, 1979, 1984, 1999b, 2002a, 2002d). Further developments of an ‘anthropological theory of value’ along the same lines, building in part on my work, have come from other activists, notably David Graeber (2001).

Another theoretical issue that I have addressed by way of activism is that of representation in relatively simple non-Western cultures. Some 15 years ago I became engaged in an effort to provide the Kayapo Indians of Central Brazil with training and equipment to enable them to film and edit videos of their own cultural and social life, as well as encounters with the ambient Brazilian society. One of the purposes of the Kayapo Video Project was to develop the Kayapos’ ability to objectify their own culture and their response to coexistence with the alien national culture in terms they could control, employing their own categories of representation and the construction of social reality. This project spawned controversies in the journals about a series of theoretical issues involved in indigenous uses of media, and related questions of social consciousness and representation (Turner, 1990a, 1990b, 1991a, 1992, 1995b, 1997a, 1997b, 2002b, 2002c).
These and other contemporary examples of activism and applied projects bring together political and ethical concerns, but they also raise fundamental theoretical issues, associated with anthropology’s imbrication in the changing historical situation of the peoples and cultural formations with which it works. They are ‘total social facts’ in Mauss’s sense, but even more inclusive in that they include the involvement of anthropology, as discipline, profession, theoretical enterprise and individual researchers in the situations they study or otherwise deal with in their professional capacity. The struggles over ethics and the application, or applicability, of ethical principles have given rise to theoretical reflections on the nature of anthropological research as a social activity involving effects upon, responsibilities to and rights of subjects. The anthropological statement on human rights prepared by the AAA Commission on Human Rights in 1993 produced a new formulation of the relevant anthropological meaning of ‘human’, and a balancing of the theoretical claims of such universalistic theoretical formulations and cultural relativism. The document rests its definition on the human capacity for self-production, and with it the production of culture, which necessarily entails cultural difference (1997b; Turner and Nagengast, 1997).

This formulation, of course, has relevance beyond the sphere of human rights. Theoretically, it represents a move in the direction of praxis, or subjectively meaningful activity that is also materially objective and self-objectifying. Such activity is the source and content of all social and cultural phenomena studied by anthropology as a scientific and/or humanistic discipline; it is likewise the object of anthropological activists in their efforts to promote the empowerment of the peoples and communities with whom they work. In anthropological terms it is the common ground of social, cultural, psychological and biological aspects of human behavior; as such it comprises the interconnections between the traditional four fields and other specializations that have developed as distinct sub-fields of the discipline.

From the perspective of this unifying notion of praxis or activity, in sum, the theoretical questions that arise in relation to ethical and human rights issues, as well as activist and applied anthropological activities, are not specimens of a distinct (and lower) practical domain unconnected to pure theoretical research. On the contrary, the broad anthropological view of praxis gained through theoretical engagement with ethical and human rights issues and activist work offers the opportunity to fulfill the promise of ‘practice theory’ as developed by Bourdieu and Giddens in the 1990s. ‘Practice theory’ failed to achieve its synthetic goals because its concept of the actor as subject and agent failed to develop beyond Durkheimian limits, and it never incorporated an analysis of value capable of bridging the gap between socially productive activity and subjective motivation. These have been precisely the areas in which the more recent theoretical work associated with activism and rights has made original and valuable theoretical contributions.
Unlike post-structuralist and postmodernist cultural theories, which have built themselves on the principles of difference, decentering and synchrony in uncritical attempts to embody the new chronotope of ‘synchronic decentered pluralism’, recent anthropological activism and work on human rights has proceeded on the basis of a more genuinely critical view of the contemporary historical situation of the peoples with whom they have been chiefly concerned. Recognizing that the new chronotope and its social and political-economic conditions have opened up opportunities for cultural minorities to struggle for rights and greater autonomy, recent activist projects have also tacitly recognized that this is to a large degree the result of the fact that the sources of political control of the state, and the associated terms of cultural hegemony, have shifted out of the frame of the internal political-economic, ethnic and cultural system of the nation-state. The dominant class(es) within the state are those that control access to transnational capital in its various forms and institutional avatars.

In an ironic but effective parallel, a number of anthropological activists have attempted to support the efforts of many indigenous groups and cultural minorities to escape the frame of the national cultures within which they are situated by carrying their struggles for recognition of their cultural differences and distinctive rights (territorial, political, social and cultural) to the transnational level. The new emphasis on universal rights, often phrased in cultural or ethnic terms, has been an important instrument for transcending the local political and legal systems of nation-states. This has helped to enable and legitimize indigenous groups’ participation in the United Nations, their collaboration with international NGOs specializing in environmentalist issues and human rights, participation in film festivals and other media events, and, in general, their reaching out to international public opinion. The payoff has been increased leverage in their home countries in defense of their territorial rights and struggles for social and cultural autonomy. Whether explicitly or only implicitly, this new politics of indigenous and other cultural minority movements embodies a critical sense that the new chronotope of synchronic pluralism that has arisen in the context of transformations in the structure of the nation-state is not to be understood or acted upon in its own cultural terms, but rather by way of manipulation of the transnational forces and relations that have given rise to it. Anthropological activists who have engaged themselves in these movements have played a leading role in developing a critical theoretical understanding of the historical forces and transformations that have underlain the emergence of new cultural and social realities. These achievements have not been won by celebrating the decentering of structures and the irreality of historical ‘narratives’, but by centering their activities on the promotion and empowerment of the self-productive activity of those with whom they have worked, and aiding such groups in challenging and transforming the structures which affect their lives.
References


Terry Turner taught anthropology for many years at the University of Chicago and Cornell University and has written many essays on topics ranging from social theory to activism. As he is the subject of this special issue of *Critique of Anthropology*, a fuller discussion of his intellectual biography appears in the introduction and a review of his published works appears in a selected bibliography on pp. 133–7. Address: Department of Anthropology, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA. [email: tst3@cornell.edu]