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# Where did anthropology go?: or the need for 'human nature'

## Book section

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Where did anthropology Go?

[published in Maurice Bloch, “essays on cultural transmission”]

The question: “Where did anthropology go?” was recently asked of me by a psycho-linguist from a famous American university. She was commenting on the fact that she had tried to establish contact with the anthropology department of her institution, hoping that she would find somebody who would contribute to a discussion of her main research interest: the relation of words to concepts. She had assumed that the socio-cultural anthropologists would have general theories about the way being brought up in different cultures and different environments would constrain or not constrain the way children were able to represent the material and the social world. She was hoping for information about exotic societies and about those groups, which she had already learned, should not be called primitive, but that is what she meant. She was hoping that her enquiry about a topic which is inevitable in any discussion about culture would be one which would be equally central to the three disciplines of psychology, linguistics and anthropology, and which would therefore be an ideal ground for constructive co-operation; that is one where the different parties could articulate and challenge the theories on which their different disciplines were built.

In fact she found nobody who was interested in working with her, but what surprised her most was the hostility she perceived, caused, not only by the suggestion that cultural social anthropologists were interested in simple exotic societies, but even more by the idea that they might be interested in formulating and answering general questions about the nature of the human species or that their work could be compatible with disciplines such as hers.

The lack of any generalising theoretical framework within which her concern might find a place is not surprising when we look at what kind of thing is done in many university departments under the labels social or cultural anthropology. Take for example the interests listed on the web site of the anthropology department of the University of California at Berkeley. Here are some *Genomics and the anthropology of modernity, Science and reason, The anthropologies of education, law, tourism, Food and energy, space and the body, Post-soviet political discourse, Violence, trauma and their political and subjective consequences, Social and cultural history, (Post) colonialism, Social mediation of mind.*

I do not intend here to criticize the value of the studies which lie behind these titles. In fact, I know that many are excellent and interesting, but one need not be surprised that our psycho linguist got so little response to her request for a coherent body of theories. What possible core of shared questions and interest could such a varied department have to which her interest might then be related? Furthermore, when occasionally, in contemporary anthropology, a proposal of

more general import is made, as for example the argument by Nancy Shepper Hugues, based on an example from Brazil, that grinding poverty leads to indifference on the part of parents towards the death of their children, the matter is criticised anecdotally at the ethnographic level, but at the theoretical level not systematically tested and simply left to float in never never land. This incoherent fragmentation, in any and every direction, so long as it will find favour with funding bodies and seems relevant to the concerns of the moment, makes the existence of anthropology departments as working units difficult to justify. This is something which was already complained about by Eric Wolf shortly before his death and which led to the near destruction of anthropology at Stanford University?

But are we dealing simply with a problem internal to the ways in which universities function, simply an accidental result of the way the discipline has evolved in the academy, yet another illustration of the inevitable arbitrariness and shift of boundaries within science? The frustrated hope on the part of our psycholinguist that she could obtain guidance to her questions from professional anthropologist might indeed seem a rather limited problem of communication within modern universities, where, after all, it is common for people from one discipline to misunderstand the nature of another department.

I shall argue today that, in fact, there is much more at stake, because the type of request made by our psycholinguist for a discipline, such as what anthropology might reasonably be assumed to be, is far from an arcane missed appointment, internal to the cloistered world of academia.

Let us consider a very different situation.

One evening, about six month ago, I was doing field work in the little village of Ranomena. This is a place deep in the Malagasy forest, cut off from all modern means of communication and only reachable on foot. I was sitting in near total darkness in the tiny house of the family who have been my hosts, on and off, during several periods of field study scattered over almost thirty years. The evening meal had been eaten and consequently the fire had burned down. This was, as is usual at this time, a rare moment of relaxation and reflection in which I joined freely. The conversation soon turned, as it often did, to questions of a philosophical nature though it had begun in a less abstract way. People had been imitating, remembering and making fun of the accents and the vocabularies of other ethnic groups in the huge and culturally very varied Island of Madagascar. The people of the village, the men at least, are experts in linguistic and cultural variation since, when they are young and vigorous, they go as wage labourers to many different parts of the country, working for several month at a time as woodcutters or carpenters where they are often employed by merchants originating from different parts of the Indian subcontinents. After having been reminded of the linguistic variation they had encountered on their travels, the conversation rapidly took on a more theoretical turn. If people used different words, did they understand the phenomena they designated so differently in the same way? If we are all related, how had this variation come about? Were the speakers of unrelated languages fundamentally different types of moral beings? And, if they were, as some maintained, was this due to the language they had learnt or was the language the manifestation of a deeper cause? In order to grapple with this problem the discussants proposed a thought experiment. What about the children of those Malagasy who had emigrated to France and who only spoke French? Were they in any sense really Malagasy in their social morality, in their ways of thinking and working and in their emotions? Would their skin be whiter than that of their parents? And, if not, as everybody seemed finally to agree, would their dark skin mean that they would learn Malagasy more easily if

they came back to live in Madagascar than, for example, I had, or the children of Europeans? Thus, the question of what is learnt and what is innate was formulated and reformulated in many, often, completely abstract general forms. The seminar continued. If there was so much variation and mutability, could one say that all humans were one species or several? Were there discontinuities in racial and cultural variation or only continuums? If we were all one family and, at bottom, all thought alike, how could it be possible that the histories of different groups of mankind had been so dissimilar and had given rise to such differences in technological knowledge and wealth? Why were the people from overseas, which the people of Ranomena tend to consider all much of a muchness, continually fighting, when they, by contrast, were all so peaceful? And, given the fact that there is only one God (it is a Catholic village) how could it have come about that there were people in the world who would do such completely exotic, unthinkable things, as burn their corpses, as do the Hindus?

These were the questions I recorded in just one evening, but they and other related ones are a familiar feature of intellectual life in Ranomena. People argue among themselves over these matters, whether I am there or not. However, because I was there, and that, by now, after many efforts at explanation, the villagers of Ranomena had some idea of the kind of subject I taught, they turned to me for advice and expertise. After all, as they often tell me, I had seen and read about many more different people in the world than they had, I had studied long and hard and had gathered in myself the wisdom of many other knowledgeable people who had been my teachers. So, what could I say about these crucial questions? Well I answered as best I could. But, what strikes me most clearly, as I reflect on such pleasant and interesting evenings, is that my co-villagers, in spite of a lack of formal education, were coming to the subject of anthropology with much the same questions as we might expect from anybody who turns to the discipline in a country such as the Netherlands, whether as students, or as readers of learned publications, or as members of other disciplines in the academy. Indeed, as you may have noted, the very same question was being asked of people who describe themselves as anthropologists by the psycholinguist of my introduction and the Malagasy villagers.

The point I want to stress through these anecdotes is that there is a widespread, perhaps universal demand for a subject such as anthropology and that this demand exists irrespective of culture, degree of education and intellectual tradition. People of all kinds ask questions of the sort of scholars anthropologists would seem to be. One can assume that it is to get answers to such questions, as those that were asked by the villagers of Ranomena, that people in the Netherlands, or indeed anywhere choose to study the subject, if this is possible for them.

But, had the villagers of Ranomena actually penetrated the portals of the academy, would they, then, have had to face the same disappointment as our psycholinguist? The answer is probably yes. And, in order to understand how and why this state of affairs has come about I attempt here an extremely brief overview of the academic history of the subject. One which will inevitably involve gross oversimplification and will ignore many counter currents and eddies.

The late nineteenth century was a time when a number of highly influential anthropological books were published. These purported, no less, than to give a general account of the history of humanity in terms of general evolutionary laws. Thus, general characteristics of human beings were seen to be the cause of human history which, therefore, had a necessary and unilineal character. These type of books were not new, but, what was new, was the fact that these general accounts were to be supported by a scientific research enterprise, the aim of

which was to collect evidence for the different theories. This became the justification for the setting up of university chairs and ultimately departments of anthropology in many European and American countries.

The discipline was thus to operate a bridge between the history of life up to the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, the subject matter of Zoology, and the history of mankind from the time of the invention of writing, by which point historians could take over. Evidence to account for what had happened during this gap was to come from the four fields approach, still evident in many anthropology departments in the United States. The four fields were archaeology, biological anthropology, linguistics and what became social and cultural anthropology.

The role of social or cultural anthropology in this schema was to provide evidence for the reconstruction of the history of mankind through the study of primitive people. The study of these people was relevant because it was assumed that the different groups of mankind had had to advance along a single necessary line of progress from one stage to another, where technological advances led to linked developments in politics, kinship, religion morals and anything else possible. This being so, it followed that if one found a living contemporary group of people using a certain type of primitive technology, hunting and gathering, for example, a study of their political organisation, their kinship system, their religion and so on would yield information about the politics, kinship religion and morals of our distant ancestors who had used a similar technology. By this mean anthropology could discover the mode of life of those forebears of advanced peoples whose prehistory was being gradually revealed by archaeology.

This general method was shared by most anthropological accounts of the time, although, of course, the evidence produced in this way was far from clear and thus a number of competing accounts of the early history of mankind were produced. All these, however, shared an amazing confidence in the ability of the subject and its methods to fulfil the vast program which it had outlined for itself. These theories are usually described as evolutionist or more precisely as unilineal evolutionist theories.

The period about which I have been talking may be referred to as that of the founders of the subject. It produced an ordered image of the history of mankind and of cultural and social variation. It is probably because of this that in many ways it may be thought of as the heyday of anthropology's popular success and consequently we may consider what happened next as its *gottedamerung*. But in fact, there is not one account to be told about this subsequent history of the evolutionists light, but two. The first concerns the reputation of this moment of confidence in the subject among anthropologists and the other is its reputation in the wider world beyond. It is the interaction of the two which interests me.

Very shortly after its establishment, evolutionist anthropology was destroyed by an obvious but fundamental criticism. This criticism took very different forms but it is always ultimately based on the same objection and is usually called the theory of diffusionism. The basic point of diffusionism is that human culture does not go along a predetermined line, following a limited number of ordered stages, because human beings have the ability to learn from each other and can, therefore, pass on acquired cultural traits through communication. It is not fundamental essential characteristics of human beings which explains history but the accidents of with whom they are and have been in contact. Unlike animals to whom evolutionary laws apply and who are determined in the long term by their biological inheritance, humans are determined by other individuals, in other words culture.

The implications of the focus on the ability of humans to borrow one from another is far reaching. Since people borrow cultural traits one from another, they can individually combine bits and pieces from and, therefore, there are no naturally distinct social or cultural groups. And since these combinations are from anywhere, anybody and in any order, there are no laws of history. In other words, because humans can, unlike other animals, transmit acquired characteristics across and within generations, the history of culture becomes an entangled, disordered, extraordinarily complex, mess, quite unlike the ordered procession envisaged by the evolutionists. And, since the past was this tangled directionless web so will the future be; it cannot therefore be predicted. Again, putting the matter at its most abstract, one can say that what the diffusionists demonstrated is that the general characteristics of human beings, as such, cannot specify the unfolding of human history.

This is a massive blow against the original ambition of a science which was going to explain what had happened in human history, in terms of a necessary evolutionary sequence and in my view no subsequent theoretical criticism has ever had a similar impact. In fact the fundamental nature of the point has meant that it has since simply been repeated, though in many different forms, of which the emphasis on the construction of human beings by culture in various post modern guises, is only one with the consequent abandonment of that as a basis for theory, the rejection of so called "grand theory" in other words.

It is when we consider this modern variant of diffusionism that we can see at its most stark what has happened in the subject. Anthropology began in a manner which assumed that human history could be written like the natural history of human beings, as though they were an ordinary kind of animal, whose behaviour was governed by the same kind of natural laws as other forms of life. This was then shown to be wrong by the emphasis on culture, the product of complex communication, the producer of unpredictable historical particularities. Thus, the evolutionary theory was thrown out and people were represented as infinitely variable creatures, constructed entirely by the whims of numerable accidents of communication. Animals were constructed by nature, humans by their free minds. This being so anthropology could not anymore have as its subject matter human nature because it had apparently been showed that there was no such a thing. Social and cultural anthropology could then only be, like history, an assemblage of anecdotes about this and that, and this is what it became and what produced the heterogeneous list of interests of the Berkeley department.

There has, however, been only one other really significant tendency which does not fit in the dichotomy between an evolutionary theory about human nature and a mentalist culturalist one about the hole where human nature used to be. This third theory I shall call functionalism here, although I include under this label much more than is usually done. I use the term in recognition of a theoretical position which is not often given its due partly because it was so clumsily theorised, although I recognise and accept the often repeated criticism that have been made against it but which apply to extreme formulations which in fact were never very significant.

What I understand by functionalism is, above all an emphasis on seeing culture not as a disembodied system of traits, beliefs, symbols, representations, etc... but as existing in reality only as a part of the wider ecological process of life. As such, there is in functionalism a stress on the unity of processes, not on the merely on the wholeness of illusory units called societies and cultures, but on a form of epistemological *monism* uniting the individual and the environment, the mental and the biological and nature and culture. It is not accidental that such a position has developed together with the advocacy of long term field work and it

has waned with its decline, since keeping in mind the reality of life processes is difficult in theories which are based on narrative accounts and which therefore analyse one thing after another. Such a stance therefore requires a constant effort.

This is probably why, as I suggested above, functionalism, in the very general sense in which I am using it here, has of late been losing ground and why it has been replaced by various theories of the diffusionism/ constructivism type. It is also probably because it has been such a European stance that it has been drowned by imported theoretical American debates, endlessly stuck in the evolutionist diffusionist controversy.

The contemporary situation seems to be therefore one where evolutionism has been dismissed and diffusionism has won leading to the existence of a discipline without the only centre it could have: the study of human beings.

This is well illustrated by the form of most contemporary anthropology teaching. At the risk of caricature, it seems to me that anthropology courses, whether introductory or more specialised, have in common a general structure. They begin with a historical section, where general theories of early anthropologists are explained. These may be from long ago, such as those of Boas, Durkheim, Westermarck or Morgan, or, more likely, from the middle distance, Mauss, Radcliffe Brown, Malinowski, Van Wouden, or Levi-Strauss. Then, what is wrong with these theories is demonstrated usually by means of ethnographic examples and there the matter rests. The student is, therefore, left not only with a feeling of having little to say about the subject in general. He or she has lost a few misleading illusions in the process, but also, more insidiously, has got the feeling that the very attempt to try to generalise, as the historical figures did, was itself wrong. To be a good anthropologist thus seems to be to have learnt not to ask the questions which the Ranomena villagers or our psycholinguist do.

This largely negative stance is not simply due to the way anthropology has developed within the academy, it is also due to the non academic reputation of the early evolutionary theories.

In general terms, ideas and publications concerning a unilinear evolution of human societies, seen as going through a fixed number of stages, antedates greatly the academic anthropological evolutionists but, probably in part because these were so much in accord with their time, the works of the founders had an extraordinary influence in their time, often, somewhat indirectly through the mediation of other types of writers such as Freud, Marx and several influential literary figures. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth was, therefore, the period when anthropology as an academic subject, although as a very young academic subject was enormous on intellectual life in general. Since then, however, if we ignore minor moments which for a short time seem to buckle the trend, the general influence of contemporary anthropology has declined. The work of more recent anthropologists, especially those whose work has come out since the 1950, with the possible exception of that of Margaret Mead on sex and Levi-Strauss on structuralism, has had little influence on the main intellectual currents of their time.

On the other hand, the influence of the founders of the discipline has continued unabated, distilled in various forms in the general culture in which we bathe. The idea of an evolutionary sequence of societies customs, laws, religions, morals, extremely similar to that set out by the evolutionist anthropologists continues, even though sometimes a little disguised for the sake of political correctness. Thus few people flinch at the implications of remarks such as "It is particularly

shocking to witness such brutality in the twentieth century and in an advanced country." Even more surprising is that books such as those of Tylor, Morgan or Frazer, which in their times sold far far more than any contemporary anthropology books are still much read and are actually still in print. The reason for the continuing influence of these writers and the relative lack of influence of their successors is not difficult to imagine. It is simply that these early authors gave answers, however unacceptable, to the questions asked by the Malagasy villagers and our colleagues in other disciplines, while more recent anthropologists do not.

The fact that professional anthropologists live in a world where theories they consider obsolete still dominate, while their own voices are little heard, has a reinforcing effect on the negative theoretical character of their teaching. Every year university anthropologists are faced with new generations of students who have, or are imagined to have, consciously or unconsciously absorbed anthropological evolutionist theories. Thus the teaching of anthropology is often envisaged by the professionals as an endless fight against erroneous doctrines held by the neophytes and which, ironically, were largely encouraged, if not created, by the first academic anthropologists.

But there is yet a further element in the educational scene which influences anthropology and pushes still further in this same direction.

Apart from the general impression that attempting to formulate general theories is a bad and obsolete habit, another message comes through loud and clear in the teaching of anthropology. That is that one of the very bad things which the early anthropologists did, was that they placed their own values above those of other cultures, and that they therefore saw evolution as necessarily progressing towards peoples and types of societies such as theirs. It followed that those most unlike themselves were rude primitives of the very lowest order. To do this sort of thing is called ethnocentrism and is very wicked. Such a message is easily and well received by the kind of students who are likely to choose anthropology and who come from a world where the evils of racism and intolerance have been all too clear.

However, things are not so simple because when we look more closely we find all kinds of elements treacherously merged under this notion of ethnocentrism. The charge that the evolutionist anthropologists were somehow revelling in the inferiority of those they chose to call primitives and that this view legitimated violence against them is anachronistic and when these writers are seen within the context and language of their time, grossly unfair and, ironically, ethnocentric. Thus, Tylor, the founder of British anthropology was very active in the anti-slavery movement and Morgan the founder of American anthropology was closely involved in supporting Indian rights. Indeed this real political involvement contrasts with that of many contemporary anthropologists who willingly denounce evolutionism as part of their general campaign for political correctness.

Equally involved in the notion of ethnocentrism is the warning against seeing people of other cultures through the lens of our own values. In fact, two elements should be distinguished here. The first is a methodological point. It is an injunction to anthropologists that the task of interpretation requires as much as possible an effort of imagination. We must try to see others as though from their point of view in order to understand them. Few would quarrel with the benefit of such a stance. But closely intertwined with this is the idea that the avoidance of ethnocentrism is not just a matter of temporary suspension of disbelief but an absolute injunction i.e. that one should never judge or evaluate

others by the categories or standards of our culture. This proposal leads therefore inevitably to moral and cognitive relativism.

The ethical problems of moral relativism are fundamental and have often been discussed, notably by de Martino. Here I want to concentrate on the theoretical, or perhaps the rhetorical, problems involved in cognitive relativism.

Cognitive relativism is often adopted without much theoretical scrutiny since it involves a gut reaction to any attempt at generalisation by showing the generalisation to be nothing but a mere product of the particular cultural configuration of the ethnographer situated as he or she inevitably is, at a given time in a given place. The demonstration that this is so is a source of great satisfaction to the profession as it demonstrates the superiority of anthropologists over lay people. What *they* think of as the bedrock of their ideas is nothing but the shifting sand of a unique historical conjuncture in a unique location.

Now there is no doubt that this kind of criticism of much theory, especially social science theory, is one of the major contribution that anthropologists have made to scientific enquiry. However, such a position can slip into giving the impression that the very attempt to generalise about human beings, however subtly done, is always going to be wrong because it will *always* be nothing but the projection of the anthropologists way of thinking. This implies the idea that anthropological discourse can *only* be of this sort since any idea about what human beings are is in no way constrained by any external reality. Anthropology as a generalising science about human beings becomes a mere illusion of particular cultures or to put it another way, the very idea of human beings as a subject of study is shown, once again, to be false.

Of course, such an implication is rarely explicit, because, when it is, it runs into the well known internal contradictions which absolute relativism inevitably creates, i.e. that such a conclusion is also a particularistic cultural mirage. Instead, we have something which might almost be called an anthropological mood, rather than a theory. However, the damage is done all the same, and the damage is that any anchor for a subject such as anthropology has been abandoned since cognitive relativism amounts to a declaration that the discipline is about nothing. It is not surprising then that anything goes.

We find ourselves in the present ridiculous situation where when the question: Do human beings exist? is asked most people, although they probably will consider it rather silly, will answer, without hesitation, in the affirmative. Anthropologists, on the other hand, will want very much to answer no but want dare so will just go into hiding.

Part of the explanation for this embarrassment is that a straight negation taken together with what being a member of an anthropology would seem to mean literally, would imply arguing themselves out of a job. So thinking that through is also avoided.

Of course denying the unity of mankind is not new in anthropology but those who previously advocated such a position, the so called polygenists of the nineteenth century, argued that mankind was made up of four unrelated species and who consequently approved of slavery and the hunting of Australian Aborigines as though they were wild animals. These might not be the precursors the present day relativists would wish to claim.

This surreptitious abandonment of a notion of human nature involved in the condemnation of ethnocentrism combines dangerously smoothly with the negative stance which the history of the subject has produced and which I discussed above. These two elements reinforce each other in an obscure way. This is what produces the situation I described at the outset of this lecture, where anthropologists instead of attempting to respond to the kind of request of our psycho linguist go into what looks like a silent sulk wrapped in an aura of self righteousness.

But of course the questioners, whether they be academic colleagues or Malagasy villagers, are less impressed with such a stance than the anthropologists would like them to be. And so they go elsewhere than anthropology departments to look for their anthropology. And there is much that is available, for example in the works of writers whose academic affiliations are very varied but which I label here, for the sake of simplicity, as the generalising writers. Thus we have Richard Dawkins, a zoologist, explaining kinship, Rene Girard, a scholar of literature, expounding on the origin of religion, Stephen Pinker, a psycholinguist, telling us about totemism and Daniel Dennet, a philosopher, telling us about marriage rules. The success of such works can be seen easily if we look at the sales of their books, a success which contrast dramatically with those of my colleagues. They number in hundreds of thousands. In other words they have the same kind of diffusion as the work of Tylor, Frazer or Morgan had and they probably have similar influence. The reason is not difficult to find it is simply that these works seem to offer answers to the universal questions of a public hungry for anthropology.

We may well ask what is the reaction of professional anthropologists to such competitors. The answer is none at all. They consider such theories with so much distaste that they seem to be unaware of their existence. Thus, until I introduced the topic in a seminar, none of my colleagues at LSE had ever heard of Dawkins proposal about the nature of culture or of the word *memes* which he had coined to express it. This is at a time when, if you type the word on Google you obtain 1,280,000 entries.

The point is that, not only do anthropologists not produce the same kind of works as those of Pinker or Dawkins, it is that they seem to have nothing to say about them. They have withdrawn from the fray to a place where they produce a large number of studies, some good, some bad, about this and that without any guiding reason or without any idea of building up a coherent body of knowledge. It is as though they considered the proposals made in this extra disciplinary anthropology as so beneath them that they are unwilling to acknowledge its very existence.

Part of the distaste of anthropologists towards such work is not simply arrogance, it is the feeling on their part that they have seen it all before. Indeed when we turn to the books of these writers, we usually find exactly the same problems which anthropologists have demonstrated and denounced throughout the twentieth century in the work of the founders. For in the work of these writers we come across, for example, the old easy assumption that contemporaries with simple technology are fossils of an earlier age, that human groups form distinct empirical entities, that there are obvious and necessary connections between technology and such things as ancestor worship etc.. Perhaps the problem is simply that social and cultural anthropologists are simply world weary and that they say to themselves: we have shown the people the error of their ways and nobody listened so why should we waste our energy in doing so yet again, rather, like Candide, let us withdraw and cultivate our little garden. But in fact repeating the same thing endlessly does not usually worry academics. The reason is not

only that anthropologists have shown, and could show again, quite rightly, what was wrong with the simplistic answers the founders and their generalising successors produced and produce. It is that, in the process of criticising the answers given, they have dismissed the questions and that their problem is that, even though they may have done this to their own private satisfaction, everybody else is still asking.

Perhaps, you might think, the solution to the present situation may simply be to advise people as our psycho-linguist or the Malagasy villagers not to waste their time asking their questions of the social and cultural anthropologists and turn to the natural science writers. A kind of solution advocated by writers such as Dan Sperber. This, however, would also be unfortunate, although this is what is happening. First of all, as I have just pointed out the failings of the kind of answers such writers are liable to supply have been well thought through by professional anthropologists in their discussions of the founders of their discipline but which are still as relevant when addressed to modern writers with similar theories. Secondly, these writers can actually give much more limited answers to the questions they pose than appears at first sight. Indeed, the nature of this limitation is the source of the recurrence of the unsatisfactory answers which they produce.

The reason why the evolutionist writers failed is not that they asked the fundamental questions but that having asked them they assumed that the answers to these general questions would supply directly explanations about particular human situations. The problem with the diffusionist response was that by pointing out the inadequacy of the type of answers supplied by the evolutionists they discredited any consideration of the questions which remained asked by others.

The present situation is that professional anthropologists are diffusionists both in their fascination with the lack of evident principles governing human society and their consequent turning away from general explanation. While the writers from outside the discipline who I have just referred to are evolutionists, sometimes explicitly, but in any case epistemologically, and furthermore they are repeating the mistakes of their precursors. The problem is that they propose and proposed general characteristics about human beings as explanations of the conditions in which human beings find themselves at particular times and places. It is a bit as if someone proposed to account for the pattern of motor traffic in Amsterdam with an explanation of how the internal combustion engine functioned.

The problem with the evolutionists modern or of the past is their refusal to face the reality of the complexity of human history and the infinite variety of human configurations caused by the very specific nature of the human animal it produces. The diffusionist reaction to deny that there is any human nature at all by a move to a totally idealist position, this is to see human history as simply not rule bound or in other words denying the existence of human beings. Thereby producing the present situation of a discipline without a core producing a multitude of unrelated little studies about this and that and one totally unable to answer the questions posed of it since it denies their very legitimacy.

The way out of this repeating scenario between the Scylla of evolutionism and the Charibdis of diffusionism is therefore not easy. It must take into listen to the questions but explain the difficulties in producing quick answers by instead of denying the naturalness of human beings and the environment in which they are placed but on the contrary stressing it and stressing how it produces not a denial of natural history but a new type of natural history.

And here the third type of theory which I mentioned, the stunted half theory which I called functionalism comes to our help. It has no problems with the historical particularism which the characteristics of the human animal produces since it has as its delights as much as the diffusionists in the infinite and unpredictable variety and complexity of the different situations in which human beings find themselves. But unlike the diffusionists it does not deny the naturalness of human beings, less for theoretical reasons than for practical reasons because it is nose to nose with the materiality of others and their environment. It has in front of it solid beings, with mind/brains as part of their body, in a solid environment both of which are caught in the rule bound unpredictability of the dialectic of life. Putting it more crudely, when you are doing field work, an experience not much different from other forms of living in society anywhere to imagine what is happening as predictable and ordered is ridiculous and so is the idea that human existence is a mere web of symbols within which we are caught, a maelstrom of traits swirling any which way, an illusory framework of temporary and transient constructions.

Now the problem with the kind of position I am suggesting is that it comes close to saying that we should take everything into account, which obviously means being unable to say any thing about anything. This is more or less what such writers as Malinowski advised and rapidly leads to an impasse, it seems also what lies beyond the kind of theories which have been called practice theory and which follow the inspiration of the French sociologist Bourdieu. Basically they recommended a view similar to mine which advocates as our focus seeing people things in their environment. Generalisation is therefore ultimately fussed on the nature of human beings but keeping in mind the historical specificity of the situations in which they place themselves.

The problem with what they advocate however is that as a result of the realism of this position it basically asks anthropologists to do everything themselves as though this was in any way feasible. Thus Bourdieu with his theory of habitus reinvents psychology a kind of private psychology for the use of social scientists, similarly it wants to create a private human geography. The task then becomes so immense that it can never get off the drawing board.

But it does not need to be so and the solution can be found in the very episode with which I started this lecture. You will remember that it concerned a psycholinguist who wanted to co-operate with anthropologists. She was not simply asking for help she was offering it also. If we want to reintroduce human beings in the middle of our study we have to recognise that our research will be common with that of other disciplines especially those concerning the capacities of the human animal especially its psychological capacity and those which concern its interaction with nature. Geography and history. The research role of anthropology will probably be as now to stress the specificity of human beings in real situations but doing this in a way which does not close cooperation but rather opens them out. The theoretical task however cannot be an anthropology only one it must be one of cooperation. Just what our psycholinguist was asking for.

But having regained our subject by having returned to the study of human beings

But that is only possible with a view of human beings which forgets their materiality, their animality and their anchoring in the real world/ something which field work restores. It makes focus on the unpredictable vagaries of history in a natural world. It is possible to recognise human history without losing the very idea of human beings. The contribution of anthropology is this. But it makes us turn to such things the physiology of human beings, the effects of technology and the environment and above all the psychological capacities of human beings.

But there is perhaps a solution to be found if we go avoid the almost endless ping pong between the camps which were represented by the evolutionists and the difusionists which seem to be being replayed today.

That being so anthropology cannot be alone it needs to turn to other disciplines to further a project which can only be joint. But here we find that others are willing to join in. Let us remember once again our psycholinguist. She not only was asking for help but also offering it.

What is necessary however is that we remain evolutionists in seeking answers to the questions, that we do not turn away from the questions asked but that by engaging in dialogue with real people we consider the complexity (come off it Bloch you are avoiding the problem) of the general in the particular.

Their lack of understanding of the distributed nature of knowledge.