

David Graeber Reflections on reflections

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DEBATE

Reflections on reflections

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Comment on Ortner, Sherry. 2016. “Dark anthropology and its others: Theory since the eighties.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6 (1): 47–73.

In many ways Sherry Ortner is the anthropologist’s anthropologist. By this I mean not just that she’s an exemplary model of the craft (though she’s obviously that), or even precisely that she analyzes anthropology’s own myths and rituals, but, rather, that she has an uncanny ability to do for her own discipline, at any point in its history, what any good ethnographer should do with a form of cultural practice: to tease out the unacknowledged—or more often half-acknowledged—logic underlying it, and to make it clear to those who were never completely aware of what they were actually doing. To do this with a group of people who see themselves as nothing if not self-aware is always something of an exploit. Ortner pulls it off regularly.

And it’s really high time someone did this because the discipline does often seem unusually adrift.

Allow me to merely jot down a few spontaneous reactions—questions, mainly, sometimes too suggestions—which I hope might encourage fruitful debate.

First, the piece seems to be rather differently framed than its most direct predecessor, “Theory in anthropology theory since the sixties” (Ortner 1984). They appear to involve somewhat different modes of explanation. The earlier essay describes a theoretical divide between materialists and idealists/culturalists in the 1960s and 1970s, overcome by the emergence of practice theory in the 1980s. “Dark anthropology and its others” (Ortner 2016), in contrast, arises as a specific response to changes in political economy on a global scale (neoliberalism) from at least the 1990s onwards. This obviously raises the question: How did the earlier split between idealists and materialists relate to the larger political economy of the time? How did each relate to the particular ways the larger political economy was



refracted through the structure of the university, and the broader institutional conditions under which anthropologists produced their work?

The easy answer would be to say that the materialism/culturalism split was simply a reflection of the Cold War, with establishment figures like Geertz or Mead as classic Cold War liberals, even when they were not receiving direct or indirect assistance from the CIA or the US Defense Department or defending those who did (Ross 1998; Price 2016), while the materialists at least saw themselves as acting in solidarity with movements of national liberation—then largely Marxist—in the global South. It's by no means an exact fit (think of figures like Marshall Sahlins), but certainly the radical materialists did see it that way. But one could also see the theoretical debate as a struggle over the role of the university. Randall Collins (2002: 646–86) has pointed out that everywhere in the world, from Sweden to Japan, the philosophers of the generation or two involved in creating an autonomous university system invariably became philosophical idealists—even in countries which had no real tradition of philosophical idealism before or have not had one since. Materialists in the 1960s and 1970s tended to question the university's claims to be an ivory tower. Since the 1980s, of course, the very idea of universities as a pure domain of thought divorced from the world seems a wistful dream: market bureaucratization has swept over everything we do as scholars. (To the point where even using the word “scholar” here sounds a bit quaint. We're not primarily scholars. For most of us scholarship is something we're at best allowed to do on the side, as a reward for the accomplishment of our primary responsibilities in teaching and administration.)

This tendency to treat academic practice in idealist terms, that is, as if it takes place in a kind of conceptual bubble separate from economic, political, or even institutional constraints, is still very much with us. In histories of the discipline, even the physical realities of producing and distributing books are often considered too vulgar to mention. Why is it that anthropologists no longer write long ethnographies like *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande* or *Coral gardens and their magic*—that is, books with enough detail that others can reinterpret the material? Why must all our information now come to us brief and predigested? If such questions are addressed at all, it's almost always described as a change in the *geist*, and certainly not because academic publishers can no longer afford to produce such books (having lost the guaranteed library sales that used to sustain such projects since Elsevier, Springer, Wiley, and other for-profit publishers began wildly inflating subscription rates for academic journals.) Even the reflexive anthropologists of the 1980s, who claimed to want to expose the power relations underlying the creation of anthropological texts, largely confined their analyses to the politics of fieldwork—that is, when the ethnographer was clearly in the advantageous position—rather than the stage when she is actually *writing* the texts (when the ethnographer, as powerless grad student, is almost entirely at the mercy of more powerful forces, ranging from grant agencies to graduate advisors, even if the latter turn out to be lazy, temperamental, sexually predatory, or insane).

This suggests that the theory of practice resolved the idealist/materialist split more in theory than in practice.

It would be interesting to ask: What is it about the *practice* of theoretical practice that made this split seem to make sense, back in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and



has made it seem to disappear today? Why have the actual mechanisms and direct effects of capitalism become visible to anthropologists at the precise moment when organized working-class opposition to capitalism specifically has largely dissipated?

This, of course, leads to the question of social movements, with which Ortner's essay concludes. Anthropologists, she notes, have begun to design projects where they are "a full participant as well as an observer." There are many questions that could be raised here, including about the institutional dangers of this sort of research (a case might be made that I'm myself a poster-boy for these), but I'll confine myself to one: Does this apply to all social movements, and if not, what are our criteria for selection? Because clearly these must exist, whether we admit they do or not.

Let me give an example of what I mean here. I have occasionally been taken to task for describing certain stateless societies or radical social movements that don't actually call themselves anarchists as "anarchistic"—the objection being, crudely put, "Who the hell does he think he is telling people who don't think they're anarchists that they are?" It makes sense to object if you think of this as deploying the power of the academy to decide who is and is not worthy of a certain desirable designation (not that many consider the title of "anarchist" particularly desirable, but let's leave that aside for the moment). This seems to violate a basic principle. Surely everyone should have the right to define themselves. But if we are talking about political movements, "everyone" never really means literally everyone. Even my most ardent critics would presumably not object to calling members of the Aryan Nations or White Power movement "racist," even if they insist that they are not. So at the very least, all academic radicals feel they have a right to decide what is a social movement that *should* have the right to decide on its own designation, and what is not. I suppose one could say, "Who the hell do you think you are deciding who has the right to define themselves and who doesn't?"—but really, almost no one would go this far. It feels intuitively right that we should be able to say National Socialists aren't really "socialists," or that the North Korean government isn't really "democratic," even if we do feel obliged to respect the Zapatistas when they say they practice democracy, and the Aymara movement in Bolivia when they say their participatory forms of decision making must be called something else. But if so, what is the basis on which to distinguish those who get to name themselves and those who don't?

It can only be because of a sense of the presence or absence of shared values of some kind. Normally, anthropologists keep these values implicit, and in most circumstances there's nothing really wrong with that, but if activist anthropology is to become an important genre, the question will necessarily come up. Because activists face this kind of question all the time. And if these values exist, are they simply values that most anthropologists happen to hold, for various historical and demographic reasons, or are they in some way intrinsic to the project of anthropology itself? This is a difficult philosophical question, and of course raises the question of what the ultimate aims of anthropology actually are. Does the very project of understanding social and cultural difference imply certain moral or political commitments?

I am not going to suggest an answer here, but let me give an example at least of the *kind* of argument I am thinking of. The philosopher Roy Bhaskar (2009: 113–21)

made a case that the famous Humean distinction between facts and values is based at least partly on a confusion about what “facts” are. Facts are not realities. They are statements *about* reality, hence part of a discourse. But in any discourse concerned with establishing “facts,” true statements are by definition valued more highly than false ones. It follows that anyone engaged in any discourse trying to establish facts has already accepted that facts are values, at least in that context. It also follows (via a few intermediary logical steps which there’s no need to get into here) that any such person would also prefer a social arrangement that can reproduce itself without having to misrepresent itself to one that cannot. If one then accepts the Marxist argument that social systems based on exploitation will always have to misrepresent themselves, one has to conclude that such systems are less desirable than a possible more honest alternative.

Now I’m not necessarily putting this particular argument forward for anthropology, just using it by way of illustration of the sort of arguments we should be considering. What is the essence of the anthropological project? And what sort of politics does it imply? One problem with the critical moment of the 1980s is that the way it was framed made it difficult for anyone who fully bought into its terms to see anthropology as having a redemptive core (even using the term “redemptive” in the most minimal sense of not inherently imperial, racist, colonial, or otherwise fundamentally flawed). As Ortner so amply illustrates here, the discipline has been proceeding, ever since, almost as if to prove to itself it is really on the side of the underdog. This might be an occasion to ask: Why? Why has it felt compelled to do so? Is there something inherent in the nature of anthropological inquiry itself that made this populist turn inevitable? (I should emphasize: I don’t claim to know the answer to this question.) And if the very practice of anthropology does imply a certain politics, what exactly might that politics be?

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