Second Edition

ANTHROPOLOGY IN THEORY

ISSUES IN EPISTEMOLOGY

Edited by Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders

WILEY Blackwell

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Anthropology in Theory

Issues in Epistemology

SECOND EDITION

Edited by

Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders

WILEY Blackwell

This edition first published 2014
© 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148–5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available on request

PB ISBN: 9780470673355

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Brenda Mayo, Untitled. Reproduced by permission of the artist.
Cover design by Simon Levy Associates

Notes on the Editors

Henrietta L. Moore FBA is the William Wyse Chair of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. Her work on gender has developed a distinctive approach to the analysis of the interrelations of material and symbolic gender systems, embodiment and performance, and identity and sexuality. She has worked extensively in Africa, particularly on livelihood strategies, social transformation, and symbolic systems. Recent research has focused on virtual worlds, new technologies, and the relationship between self-imagining and globalization. Her most recent monograph, *Still Life: Hopes, Desires and Satisfactions* (Polity, 2011), argues for a reconsideration of globalization based on ordinary people's capacities for self-making and social transformation.

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General Introduction

Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders

Theory as Practice

This collection attests to the strength and diversity of anthropological theorizing in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. We use the term “theorizing” rather than the more usual noun form “theory” because the pieces collected here are intended to reflect the practice of engaging with theory, particular ways of thinking, analyzing, and reflecting that have emerged in the context of writings over this period. Anthropology as a discipline has a number of subdivisions or “traditions.” These may be broadly cast as national – as in British, American, Japanese, Brazilian anthropology – and regional – as in the particular theoretical concerns of specific regions, such as “persons,” “cross-cousin marriage,” “gift exchange,” and so on. The boundaries between these different “traditions” are far from fixed, and indeed are being constantly transcended. The writings collected here draw on a variety of perspectives. Our aim is not to provide a representative sample of any – and certainly not all – traditions, but to make available a flavor of the intellectual conversations and debates on specific epistemological issues that formed the practice of theorizing in twentieth- and early twenty-first-century anthropology.

No one collection could ever hope to be representative of anthropological theories per se. The question “What is anthropological theory?” is inextricably tied to the question “What is anthropology?” (Moore 1999: 2; Moore and Sanders, this volume). Anthropology has been variously

defined as the study of “other cultures,” “cultural difference,” “social systems,” “world views,” “ways of life,” and “forms of knowledge.” Sometimes these abstractions are given more concrete referents, such as political systems, livelihoods, kinship systems, family structures, and religious beliefs. The only difficulty is that neither the more abstract conceptual categories nor the empirical entities are the exclusive domain of anthropology, which immediately raises the issue of how we would delineate specifically anthropological theories. This is obvious in the practice of anthropology, since most anthropology courses begin by teaching students about Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, whose writings have been formative for the discipline. Contemporary anthropological theorizing also engages in extensive theoretical borrowing, and recent examples would include the work of Bourdieu, Foucault, Gramsci, Bakhtin, Agamben, and many others. We make no attempt in this collection – it would in any case be impossible – to provide examples of all the theories from the humanities, social sciences, and sciences that have influenced anthropological theorizing. Rather, we have integrated extracts from writers outside anthropology where their thinking contributes to particular debates or discussion points within a specific set of epistemological difficulties under discussion within the volume. For example, in section 2 on *structure and system*, we have included an extract from Durkheim (5), not only because his writings had a profound influence, albeit in different ways, on the work of Radcliffe-Brown (6) and Lévi-Strauss (8), but also because it discusses the relationship between the individual and society, which is one of the concerns of section 1. The extract from Durkheim thus provides both a context for readers engaging with the work of Radcliffe-Brown and Lévi-Strauss and an indirect commentary on the vexed question of what distinguishes social structures from social relations. Our intention throughout has been to portray anthropological theorizing

as a set of dialogues – dialogues that are not only internal to the discipline, but also engage with writings outside the discipline from which anthropology has often sought inspiration. Thus we have included extracts that not only reflect a writer's theoretical position – or at least one of her or his positions – but can also be maintained in a productive relation with positions taken by other writers elsewhere in the volume. Consequently, individual extracts should not be taken as necessarily representative of an individual's entire oeuvre.

In designing a collection of this kind, it is evident that a plethora of organizational principles proffer themselves, all with strengths and weaknesses. It might have been feasible – if somewhat constraining – to have divided anthropological theorizing into anthropological theories of "kinship," "politics," "economics," and so on. Equally, it might have been appropriate to divide disciplinary endeavor into "schools of thought," such as functionalism, structural-functionalism, and structuralism. Another possible set of categorizations might have been suggested by reference to specialist sub-fields, such as the anthropology of cognition, art, nationalism, psychology, development, gender, the body, medical anthropology, and so on. All these sub-fields borrow extensively from other disciplines and many of them require specialist theoretical knowledge. Every one of these ways of organizing the collection was considered. They were ultimately abandoned not just because as categorizations and principles of organization they can be readily contested, but because we wanted to emphasize what might be distinctive about anthropological theorizing, that is, the *practice* of it.

How This Book is Organized

Anthropology is not anthropology because it studies kinship or cognition or politics or art, or because it has had practitioners who are structuralists or post-structuralists. What is distinctive about anthropology is the way it has created and constructed itself, the particular history of the formation of ideas that have given rise to a distinctive discipline and a set of associated practices. It is this process of theorizing that this volume seeks to capture. Today's conversations are clearly different from those of the past, and while it is difficult to understand contemporary concerns without some knowledge of the origins of the debates, the volume is not organized on a purely historical basis. The aim has been to show the recursive and enduring nature of key questions, principally the lasting search for a more complete understanding of the anthropological object of inquiry; in other words, the extent to which anthropological theorizing has always been driven by the question "What is anthropology?" The volume thus aims to demonstrate both the variations and the continuities in the key questions anthropologists have asked: "what is the relationship between the individual and society"; "what is the difference between society and culture"; "what makes us distinctively human"; "how are we to comprehend cultural difference in the context of a universal humanity"; "what is the relationship between models and reality"; "what is the relationship between the models of the observer and those of the observed"?

The collection as a whole provides an introduction to these questions for readers inside and outside anthropology. It also builds up a dialogue about specific sets of assumptions

on which theorizing in anthropology is based, the methods appropriate to address certain questions, and the theoretical frameworks through which they are received. So, for example, in section 2, *structure and system*, we have included extracts from different writers discussing the term "structure" and what it encompasses and entails. A concept such as "structure" not only defines the kinds of questions that can be asked of data, but also determines the methods used to collect data. The aim of each section is to provide a kind of minor "genealogy of knowledge" where the extracts explore through dialogue with each other not only what certain concepts and the pre-theoretical assumptions on which they are based reveal, but also what they remain silent on, the questions that do not get asked. The overall structure of the book is, as we have said, not historically oriented, but is, rather, based on a series of counterpoints or questions, so that issues on which certain sections are silent get picked up later in subsequent sections. The contributions can, of course, be read in any order, but the volume's layout is intended to provide a pathway through a series of interlinked debates for readers less familiar with anthropology. We provide an overview of the theoretical development of anthropology in the twentieth and early twenty-first century and its epistemological concerns in the next chapter (Moore and Sanders, this volume).

In *part I*, the debates are animated by the question of the relationship between society and culture, and indeed the issue which divided British and American anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century: whether it was culture or society that formed the object of anthropological inquiry. Different writers in the sections in *part I* discuss the definition of these terms and how they relate to the individuals who comprise them. One major difficulty here is the fact of cultural difference and how it relates to our common humanity, to the environment in which we live, and

to our individual natures. What is crucial is the way that cultural determinism and cultural relativism interact in the thinking of individual authors. While one could characterize the basic trend through the twentieth century as a move from strong forms of cultural determinism (humans are the products of their culture/society and its environment) to a view that emphasizes individual agency in the context of intersubjective relations with others (humans are biologically cultural beings who develop within a cultural world) (see Moore and Sanders, this volume), this would be to ignore the recursive nature of epistemological postulates in anthropological thinking. The extracts in this part demonstrate the differences between writers of similar historical periods, and the continuities and discontinuities between contemporary writers and those at the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly with regard to the mechanisms that link forms of abstraction – concepts such as "structure," for instance – to forms of explanation. A perennial complication in anthropology is that since abstractions are created by the analyst, and they provide the building blocks for anthropological models, there is considerable debate about how such abstractions relate to the empirical data from which they are abstracted, and beyond that, how anthropological models qua models relate to those of informants (see Moore and Sanders, this volume).

Part II takes up these questions in a different guise and focuses on language, meanings, and interpretations, particularly with regard to the relationship of cultural meanings to actors' models. The pre-theoretical assumptions under interrogation in this part are those based on the idea that language is central to social life, that it is what defines us as human, and thus we must analyze social life as the creation and negotiation of meaning within which actors interpret their experience and order their actions. A

focus on meaning inevitably raises queries about the degree to which individuals within a culture share meanings, how knowledge may be differentially distributed as a result of power, and how meanings and values get transferred from one generation or group to another. This connects work in this area to older debates about the relationship between culture and thought, not only with regard to the beliefs and thoughts of individuals, but also in relation to the pre-theoretical assumption that language is necessary for thought. Work on bodies, praxis, and phenomenology emphasizes that there are forms of knowledge that are non-linguistic, that the human body, for example, knows the world through its engagement with the world and with others in that world. However, if practical knowledge of the world is the result of engagement with that world, then what scope is there for individual creativity or for social change; how can we negotiate the apparent impasse between objective structures and subjective experience? Thus, *part II* takes up once again, albeit from a very different angle, the question of how to transcend the division between the individual and culture, what might be intended or encompassed by the term "structures" (as in linguistic structures/structures of meaning), and how the models of both observer and observed relate to knowledge and to power (see Moore and Sanders, this volume).

Part III addresses issues of scale and comparison, but more than this, it provides a sustained reflection on a series of models for knowing the world. These models are all derived in one way or another from western philosophical traditions, and the question is the degree to which they are appropriate for knowing the worlds of other people, in other times and places. Underlying this question is a broader concern about whether it is possible to know the world. Is anthropology an objective science or a subjective form of interpretation? What kind of instrument of knowledge is the

anthropologist? Anthropology has developed a very clear critique of the relations between power and knowledge that have constituted the domain of anthropology itself and its associated practices. This debate acknowledges that knowledge is always a matter of ethics. Anthropology, like all disciplines, creates a world full of specific kinds of entities – societies, cultures – which is inhabited by particular kinds of agents – persons, individuals, etc. Much critical anthropology has served to work against the power relations that constitute the anthropological field of knowledge, and has criticized the comparative models of anthropology for occluding the perspectives, voices, and lived realities of the people being studied. This raises once again – but in the context of unequal power relations – how adequately anthropological models represent the lived reality of people's lives. However, debates in this area go further than earlier debates because they question the nature of the theoretical itself, including the very project of western knowledge as it underpins anthropology (see Moore 1999; Moore and Sanders, this volume). Hence, the discussion focuses on whether and under what circumstances comparison is possible, appropriate, and powerful. Can we do without models? Can we have objective knowledge of other people's worlds? What do we relinquish – and at what cost to ourselves and others – if we give up on the notion of anthropology as science?

Part IV discusses the shifts in the conditions of production of anthropological research and therefore of anthropological knowledge. Cultures – however they might have been represented in the past – have never been fixed, bounded, or unitary. In the context of globalization, migration, and transnational flows, anthropology has been forced to rethink not only the major concepts of anthropology – society, culture, kinship, and others – but also the very notion of cultural difference itself. This is in part because

anthropology has “come home”; “other cultures” are no longer in “other places,” and anthropology is much less able to distance itself from the communities it studies. The nature of the academy has also changed profoundly, and it is not just the communities and cultures studied by anthropologists that are transnational and transcultural, but anthropologists themselves. This has had a major impact on both knowledge construction and critical politics within the discipline. Issues of perspective, power, positionality, and hybridity have been largely forced onto the agenda of the discipline by those scholars who most forcefully live hybridity and multiple positionality. Anthropology, like the world itself, is becoming simultaneously globalized and localized. One powerful irony here is that at the very moment anthropology appeared to want to abandon the organizing trope of culture, the rest of the world started to adopt it. International agencies, local civil society groups, management consultants, consumer researchers, and a host of other groups and institutions embraced it as the lens through which to understand difference in a globalized world. It has become a mobilizing concept for many indigenous and civil society groups around the world, and in some cases the explanation for power differentials, exclusions, and even hatreds and acts of violence. The result is that not only have the contexts for anthropological research shifted, but so has the nature of the relationship between observer and observed. Anthropology and anthropologists no longer command the high ground of representation – if indeed they ever did – and have had to recognize that their view on cultural difference is only one among many. New ways of imaging the anthropological object of inquiry have emerged: new images, metaphors, and concepts. This gives rise to new practices, new ways of doing field research, of combining advocacy and research, of imagining the very nature of the social itself (see Moore 1996, 1999; and Moore and Sanders, this volume).

Locating Anthropology

It has often been said that there is no single anthropology, but only a series of anthropologies. The perspective developed in this collection would see that statement as a question of scale, as a matter of position, of what one chooses to foreground, on the one hand, and consign to the background, on the other. The variety, diversity, and richness of contemporary anthropological theorizing are indisputable, as is the existence of the vigorous debates which are its origin. However, when we speak of anthropology we should not lose sight of the fact that it is an intellectual endeavor, a discipline and a profession. In other words, it is not only about ways of thinking, but also about ways of doing in the context of specific institutions and power relations. All ideas are generated and communicated within particular historical, material, social, and political relations and processes. Styles of reasoning, as Hacking argues, create the possibility of truth and falsehood precisely because they are historically situated (Hacking 1982: 56–7). This is not to claim that truth is not the object of our inquiries or that the refinements and careful calibrations of thought, reasoning, and method that make anthropology a social science are unimportant. It is, rather, to draw attention to the circumstances, contexts, and practices within which the effects of truth are produced.

Contemporary anthropology as a discipline and as a set of practices is engaged in multiple ways with the world it reflects upon. This engagement is complex, frequently vexed, but always productive. Theorizing is not only about the nature, limits, and sources of knowledge. It is also about the process of self-reflection that constitutes the practice of theorizing on the grounds and contexts of knowledge production in a way that acknowledges their material and historical constraints and ambitions. This leads to