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BREAKING THE FRAMES

Anthropological Conundrums

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Also by Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew J. Strathern

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PREFACE

After spending many decades in the field of social/cultural anthropology, working in many countries and with colleagues and students who have come from various intellectual arenas of thought, we have decided to use our experiential knowledge to look at the phenomenon of theorizing and the 'branding' of iconic trends in anthropology.

The history of anthropology shows a constant process of change in which previously held assumptions or frameworks of analysis have been broken by new developments of theory and practice. At the risk of some oversimplification, we can see these processes in terms of moments when serious turn-arounds of perspective moved anthropology in new directions. An obvious example would be the double shift early in the twentieth century from old-style synthetic anthropology based on records made by missionaries, explorers, and colonial officials to the emphasis on first-hand fieldwork and the study of synchronic functions of customs within structural contexts. Another would be the rejection of synchronic functionalism and the move to studies of process and meaning as these emerge historically; or shifts to structuralism and then post-structuralism; or the interpretive turn and the subsequent turn to cognition.

All of these changes have been taken up by their advocates as forms of rejection or replacement of earlier styles of analysis. The rhetoric of change, however, has itself concealed aspects of continuity and overlap in perspectives. In effect, changes have not always been as absolute as protagonists have claimed. New approaches have combined breaking some frameworks while perhaps unwittingly continuing others. Functional analyses continue, for example, in many guises long after the

supposed demise of structural-functionalism; and some kind of concern with the results of actions and their place in wider fields of actions is indispensable. Institutions and patterns of thought alike do take structural forms even if structuralism is repudiated. Processes occur even if we are now supposed to be in a post-processusalist era. Finally, with all kinds of 'posts' such as post-socialist, post-colonial, or simply post-modern, it is clear that nothing is clearly 'post' anything else because past, present, and future are always co-implicated and co-present in consciousness, memory, and material culture. For instance, the house where we live in the USA was built in 1938, and every day while we are there we experience aspects of it that locate us partly in the life-world of that time.

In spite of the phenomenological reality of such a perspective, essentializing practices always seek to dichotomize life and so to reinstate frames which may then need later to be broken. The process of breaking and re-making frames is continuous, just as was pointed out by Thomas Kuhn (1962) for scientific paradigms in general. Breakthroughs of creativity occur when a particular frame is breached and a more rewarding perspective is revealed. Our major argument is that very often breaking a frame may simply involve mediating or modifying a false dichotomy on which the frame itself is based. There is also an institutional academic context in which all this happens and in consonance with our realist mode of argument we will include an exploration of this point, and proceed with others in the same critical but reconstructive vein of thought. The themes to be explored include the following, to be fitted into different segments of the work, sometimes briefly explored and at other times with a longer discussion provided:

1. Institutions: The history of anthropology exhibits conflicts between individuals and factions that result in schools or trends of theorizing. This is inevitable in a struggle for survival where resources are scarce and the competitions for them tend to be zero-sum, that is, winner takes all. However, there is an unfortunate set of results that emerge from this process: what begins as a bundle of innovative ideas ends up as dogma that stifles further innovation. We have witnessed this struggle in our own professional experience many times. The harm done to personal creativity is considerable. Sometimes students who do not conform are forced out or are not given support or are even aggressively denigrated. The same can happen with Faculty. Ageist assumptions are sometimes built in, so that Faculty with a different

viewpoint based on long and wide experience are driven out or marginalized. This kind of institutionalized boundary-making clearly shows the dangers of essentializing one trend or school of thought at the expense of others.

2. Individuals: The category of the individual is itself highly contested. One viewpoint is that the concept of the individual is historically specific and scarcely exists in what are known as socio-centric versus ego-centric societies or cultures. This dichotomy, as has often been pointed out but without enduring effect, is misleading and partial. It constitutes a frame that needs thoroughly to be broken in order to build up a more dynamic cross-cultural view of individuals in their contexts. Our concept of the relational-individual will be central to the argument here.

3. Nature and culture: A cluster of old dichotomies still informs much theoretical thinking around the topic of nature and culture (also biology versus society). The idea that nature and culture are polar opposites may have its roots back in ancient Greek philosophy, but it does not serve us well in trying to reach integrated understandings of human life processes. In practice nature and culture are closely interwoven. We will reflect here on the classic category of kinship in the light of this theoretical position, espousing neither sociobiological nor absolute cultural reductionism.

4. Retreat of the social: A recent set of studies on this theme bemoans the supposed decline of interest in the category of 'the social' or 'sociality' in favor of other approaches. We will examine some of the essays in this volume (ed. by Bruce Kapferer), recognizing their value while also resituating them in terms of our general arguments.

5. Religion: In the sphere of the analysis of religion and society new cognitivist approaches have reimported into the study of religion assumptions about rationality and reality, thus essentially opposing religion and science in a way that turns us back to nineteenth-century debates. Much cognitivist research, nevertheless, points to a greater understanding of how rituals and religious ideas work in practice. Pascal Boyer's leading idea of the 'naturalness' of religion points to one way of breaking again the misleading dichotomy of nature and culture, although he himself reimports certain universalizing propositions into his exposition.

6. Language: What is the relationship of language and culture and of both to universalist ideas of their cognitive basis? We will deal with

this theme in the context of a dichotomy between universalists and particularists, centering partly around ideas of Noam Chomsky and his followers and critics.

7. -Isms: We will reprise here in more detail the dichotomies in historical theorizing in anthropology mentioned in our beginning. We will break these down basically arguing against the reification of theoretical positions into dogmatic schools of thought.

8. Conclusion: Why dichotomies? The human mind seems to like these, but humans in action need to overcome them to retain creativity in their lives. We introduce here the idea of a mindful anthropology as a way of expressing our general stance in relation to both theory and practice in the discipline.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The final pieces of this book were completed and the manuscript was made ready to send to the press while we were researching the June 2016 Referendum in the United Kingdom (UK) to exit from or stay in the European Union (EU). We have worked for decades in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Scotland, so it was especially moving to be staying in the three locations in June, July, and August of 2016, during and after the vote for the UK to exit the EU. We have been following the economic, political, and social impacts of the shifting shape and face of Europe today and what this means for the future. The surprise vote in favor of leaving the EU shocked many people and set a huge task for the 'Brexiteers', who had played a leading role in advocating this new pathway, and those political leaders who also had to step in and handle the unanticipated consequences of the vote. It was evident that the turn of events demanded a great deal of creativity of an imaginative and mindful sort for the future. A mindful anthropology would also be needed to study this situation in all its ramifying complexities.

Contents