

Anthropology's three ontological turns: It is time for a fourth, from anti-anthropology back to anthropology.

It has been fashionable in recent years to speak of “the” ontological turn in anthropology. This phrasing is usually applied to the first of what have been three distinctly identifiable ontological turns:

- (1) From a focus on human beings to a focus on non-humans
- (2) From a celebration of the human evolutionary trajectory to the warding off of scientific and technological advances in exploring that trajectory
- (3) From an interest in the way the human story is a story of women and of men to insistence that human sexual dimorphism is culturally and historically contingent.

(1) Humans

Some of this work is “multispecies anthropology”, some of it is “cyborg anthropology”, and some of it is both. These approaches have proliferated in a discipline which once placed human beings at the center of its inquiries, not just conceptually but methodologically. For all the theoretical sophistication of the discussions of human connectedness to ecosystems, other species, and technologies from stone tools to robotics to AI, the relative methodological ease of working with entities that cannot render responsive critiques has been under-noted in explaining the burgeoning of this literature.

Anthropology after the 1960s faced a serious challenge from feminist and decolonization movements. The old models of white men “looking at” native peoples were clearly indefensible. The difficult work of restructuring the discipline in order to keep ethnographic conversations between humans about the nature of being human at its center has not just been left incomplete, it has come under sustained attack as being both intellectually and morally impossible. What now fills more and more pages of anthropology journals is work with entities that, unlike the subaltern, really cannot speak at all: bedbugs, fat pets, robot companions, starfish. Some of this work is very interesting. Cumulatively, it is in tension with the kind of work that makes anthropology anthropology, and it contributes to a scholarly culture in which research on cryogenics or blockchain technologies is greeted as intellectually more exciting and ethically superior to the kind of fieldwork that involves living on intimate terms with other human beings.

(2) Evolution

Anthropology was born of the colonial encounter but it also has a proud history of anti-racism. Until recently, this anti-racism grounded itself in an account of human evolutionary history that had all living humans descending from a single recent origin: an “out of Africa” migration that occurred some 60,000 years ago. Anthropologists could point to this history to explain that racism was not just morally but also scientifically threadbare: humans are not, and could not be, very deeply different from one another given our recent common origin. Almost all of our

observable differences, then, were the result of our species-capacity for self-creation -- of our rapidly adapting ourselves to the places we chose to live, the food we chose to eat, the items we chose to make.

Recent research that suggests our evolutionary history has been more complex, involving multiple divergences and convergences over a much longer period than we had previously supposed, has been greeted not with interest but with alarm. Because anthropology made a scientific mistake in the way it grounded its commitment to anti-racism, it was thrown into understandable consternation when the scientific ground shifted. The sensible reaction to this shift would be to re-affirm the moral commitment to anti-racism while greeting surprising new research findings with eager curiosity. Unfortunately, anthropology has taken the strange position – for a discipline otherwise so knowledgeable about the strength and tenacity of cultural values – that moral convictions may simply crumble in the face of new evidence, such that anthropological anti-racism would be threatened if anybody were to start re-examining any old notions in light of this new work. This reaction was most hoarily expressed the open letter “How not to talk about race and genetics”, which faithfully repeats the argument that single traits cannot be used to infer population groupings, a true but outdated point in the era of genome-wide association studies. This letter was published in BuzzFeed in 2018 in reaction to the publication of palaeogeneticist David Reich’s book *Who We Are and How We Got Here* (2018) and signed by many prominent anthropologists.

(3) Sex

That same letter included the following passage:

“Even “male” and “female,” which Reich invokes as obviously biologically meaningful, has important limitations. While these categories help us to know and care for many human beings, they hinder our capacity to know and care for the millions of human beings born into this world not clearly “sexed.” Further, overemphasizing the importance of the X and Y chromosomes in determining sex prevent us from seeing the other parts of the genome involved in sex.”

This passage makes a move that is increasingly common in anthropological literature: it suggests that speaking in terms of “male” and “female” or “men” and “women” is empirically unwarranted and that rather than ours being a sexually dimorphic species, among humans sex is best understood as comprising a spectrum. The impact on research is again striking. A set of highly temporally and culturally circumscribed notions, in fact an entire recently invented classificatory language (“trans”, “nonbinary”, “queer”) is projected on to rich and fascinating diversity of human sexual experience in the living world and the human past. Hijras and muxes are supposedly “transwomen” while some Viking burials are putatively of “nonbinary” individuals. It is particularly ironic that this third ontological turn presses a novel, rigidly orthodox set of ideological parameters on to the entire human story whilst self-identifying as marvelously capacious and expansive.

Anthropology and anti-anthropology

This triple ontological turn away from the human, away from evolution, and away from sex are producing a lively and prolific anti-anthropology in place of anthropology. Even if one is left cold

by these turns, watching an entire discipline engaged upon so thoroughgoing a process of auto-repudiation makes for a compelling spectacle. The private professional correspondence with colleagues of many anthropologists (myself very much included) now consists almost entirely of deliciously scandalized disbelief about the latest publications and proclamations emanating from the discipline's most prestigious venues, nearly all of which are all in for the new anti-anthropology. Public objections, when tendered, take the form of po-faced lament and dismay. Private objections, in my experience, are almost always expressed as gleeful hilarity. A discipline that has become the quiet butt of its own exponents does have its moments, but it is also in quite a lot of trouble.

A fourth and restorative turn may be in the offing. It will involve laughing in public at disciplinary tendencies about which we currently laugh in private. This is not the same as mocking particular works or particular authors. The intent of this short intervention is not to furnish a list of anathematized texts and scholars to be henceforth considered "anti-anthropological roaders". The three ontological turns have each, in their way, been good to think with. It's just that they've spun us a bit silly and it is past time to say so.

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