6.4 Critique of Humanism

Reading and Doing Ethnography
Social Anthropology 314

Traditionally, anthropology is the study of humans.

Of "Man."

The modern idea of Man, as a specific object of study, was arguably invented around 1800.

Kant's *Anthropology* (1798)

All cultural progress, by means of which the human being advances his education, has the goal of applying this acquired knowledge and skill for the world's use. But the most important object in the world to which he can apply them is the human being: because the human being is his own final end. — Therefore to know the human being according to his species as an earthly being endowed with reason especially deserves to be called *knowledge of the world*, even though he constitutes only one part of the creatures on earth.

A doctrine of knowledge of the human being, systematically formulated (anthropology), can exist either in a physiological or in a pragmatic point of view. - Physiological knowledge of the human being concerns the investigation of what nature makes of the human being; pragmatic, the investigation of what he as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself. (3)

All such attempts to arrive at such a science [of anthropology] with thoroughness encounter considerable difficulties that are inherent in human nature itself.

1. If a human being notices that someone is observing him and trying to study him, he will either appear embarrassed (self-conscious) and *cannot* show himself as he really is; or he dissembles, and docs not *want* to be known as he is.
2. Even if he only wants to study himself, he will reach a critical point, particularly as concerns his condition in affect, which normally does not allow *dissimulation*: that is to say, when the incentives are active, he does not observe himself, and when he does observe himself, the incentives are at rest. (4-5)

3. Circumstances of place and time, when they are constant, produce *habits* which, as is said, are second nature, and make it difficult for the human being to judge how to consider himself, but even more difficult to judge how he should form an idea of others with whom he is in contact; for the variation of conditions in which the human being is placed by his fate or, if he is an adventurer, places himself, make it very difficult for anthropology to rise to the rank of a formal science. (5)

Anthropology is thus the paradoxical science of a being that resists being studied.

But is the very idea of "life" as an object of study also a historical product?

Helmreich, *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas*

The very idea that life is a property that manifests in forms is modern, coming into being in coordination with the rise of biology as a discipline, solidifying around 1800. Michel Foucault, the omnivorous archeologist of ideas, argues that prior to the nineteenth century, "if biology was unknown, there was a very simple reason for it: that life itself did not exist. All that existed was living beings, which were viewed through a grid of knowledge constituted by natural history." In other words, life had not yet been cordoned off into the domain known as biology. (6)

Nature, importantly, has a genealogy distinct from biology, conveying into apprehensions of life forms additional meanings. Nature is not just that province scientists seek to describe but also a topology that retains a remnant of the mythic. In Western epistemology, nature has been imagined as a force to be dominated, tamed, struggled against. At the same time, nature has carried a strong (Judeo-Christian) religious charge, as that which is moral, inevitable, God-given, perhaps even rationally or harmoniously designed. Placed in this second tradition, biology, understood as a genre of nature that grounds culture, has often been a reference point for legitimating social relations. (7)

In the age of biotechnology, genomics, cloning, genetically modified food, and reproductive technology, however, when human enterprise rescripts and reengineers biotic material, a founding function for nature is not so easily discernable. Culture and nature no longer stand in relation as figure to ground. Life forms cannot unproblematically anchor forms of life. (7)

Oceans are seen as American frontiers

The quest for chemical compounds and genes in the bodies of such critters as deep-sea vent microbes rewrote the ancient life-giving ocean as a technoscientific frontier to be explored with a can-do commitment to comprehending, taming, and commercializing a vast wilderness. This future, unlike earlier projects of resource extraction, was envisioned as environmentally sensitive, sustainable. A historically aggressive and quasi-religious American pioneer narrative might be rewritten in the service of a scientifically oriented project dedicated to preserving life on Earth. (12)

Why is the ocean "alien" for Helmreich?

If the wild and wondrous sea belongs to a zone of being beyond a steady and grounded self–if it belongs in part to what anthropologists call the order of the Other–today's microbial marine world can profitably be seen from the science fiction–spangled angle of the alien…
I employ the figure of the alien because marine biologists so often invoke it as they describe the unfamiliar universe of marine microbes. Education-minded researchers, for example, appeal to the alien to invite kids to consider microbiology as a career: "Being a microbiologist is like being an explorer in a vast, unseen world full of weird, alien-like creatures." (15)

How did the fieldwork work?

I began by surfing the Web, reading scientific papers, attending lectures, going to conferences, speaking with marine biologists, visiting labs… Contacts at MIT allowed me to sign on for ten days to an oceanographic research trip to the Sargasso Sea on the research vessel Endeavor as well as to join an eighteen-day expedition on the research vessel Atlantis, with the deep submergence vehicle Alvin, to the hydrothermal vent fields of the Juan de Fuca Ridge, 2,200 meters below the surface of the eastern Pacific. I also attended a variety of research conferences-on deep-sea science, marine biotechnology, taxonomy, Earth system science. (19-20)

Interviews

I conducted formal and open-ended interviews (some fifty-six in all, primarily with biologists, though also with physical oceanographers, geologists, chemists, computer scientists, marine technicians, ship crew), asking people about their work, how they arrived at their interests, whether 'new technologies had transformed their methods or questions, what they considered open debates, how they saw their work contributing to a wider sense of the ocean world. I also participated in the everyday life of institutions I visited, not only attending talks and workshops but also joining scientists for lunch, dinner, drinks, recreation. To get to know aspects of marine microbiological practice well, I assisted with lab work, on land and at sea. For historical background I could not get from interviews, the library, or the Web, I conducted archival research... (20)

McLean, "Black Goo"

Picture a peat bog, somewhere in the west of Ireland, perhaps. What meets the eye first is an expanse of vegetation with scattered pools and hummocks, mostly sphagnum moss—mottled purple, yellow, and green—but interspersed with other plants like bog cotton, flowering white in the springtime. Imagine yourself stepping onto this soft, spongiform surface. Feel it yielding to your tread. Listen to the squelching, sucking sound as you raise your foot. See the imprint that you leave behind slowly filling with water and fading. Now stop and bend close to the ground. Let the dank smell that comes off the peat invade your nostrils. Plunge your hands below the layer of plant growth and down into brown-black, liquid-solid indeterminacy that lies beneath—a mixture of water and plant and animal remains, built up over hundreds or thousands of years. Feel its texture surrounding your fingers as you move them. Register on your skin the simultaneous contrast and permeability between the overgrown surface and the sticky, amphibious goo beneath. Do you find yourself wondering: what's down there? (589)

Studying matter

Anthropology's own recent efforts to engage materiality have shown an overwhelming predilection for solids… Object- and artifact-centered approaches… have characterized so much of the field of material culture studies. At the same time, many of our analytic vocabularies continue to adhere to culturally specified boundaries of persons, bodies and objects, even if we recognize in theory that such boundaries are contingent, porous and shifting. (591)

Interstitial landscapes

My focus here is on interstitial landscapes existing between clearly differentiated states of matter, specifically liquid and solid—bogs, marshes, fens or "wetlands" as they are now commonly referred to—and their relationship to that impossible to define yet world historically consequential entity known as "Europe." My wager is that such spaces and their associated cultural imaginaries are distinctively, perhaps uniquely revealing of a materiality in which human cultural expressions necessarily participate but which, at the same time forever exceeds their determinations. As such they remind us of our own relationship as human beings to the impersonal life of matter, a life that simultaneously constitutes us as organisms and subjects and that precedes and outlasts our individual existence. (592)

Europe and its matter

I regard Europe as both a geographical entity and a concept—the concept being no less real and no less fully in the world than the mountains, rivers, plains etc. comprising the geographical entity. The concept, the "Idea" of Europe… has been associated, at various times, with notions of historical exceptionalism, of the supposed distinctiveness and superiority of its political institutions, most recently in the form of the modern liberal democratic nation-state, and of scientific reason and progress, often asserting the right of Europeans to remake the world in their own image, by force if necessary. The latter conviction has found support not only in science and political theory but also in a philosophical tradition that has often sought (with some notable exceptions) to suppress or deny matter as an active principle. (597-8)

The significance of wetlands

Today, bogs, fens, marshes, and swamps are commonly referred to as "wetlands"—a term that also includes estuaries, floodplains, shallow lakes, and shorelines. It's a curious term, wetland, for all its official currency and the familiarity that comes with it. Certainly it purports to be an in-between term, denoting a zone of mixture or transition where land and water, solidity and liquidity transform and intermingle. Yet the pairing of adjective and noun conveys too an unmistakable partiality for terra firma and a concomitant desire to reduce liquidity and wetness to predicates of the solid substance of dry land. What the term wetlands simultaneously references and seeks to contain is precisely the volatility of substance that characterizes such land–water admixtures, their existence betwixt and between clearly differentiated states of matter. (608-9)

What does a non-anthropocentric anthropology look like?

Anthropology without anthropocentrism

- Considers non-human species (such as microbes).
- Considers ecologies and forms of matter (oceans, wetlands).
- Looks at how all these are understood culturally and reshaped technologically.
- Looks at "cyborgs" and digital/online life as ethnographic objects.
- Looks critically at who "human beings" are considered to be and why.
- Critiques overly "social" (sociocentric) ontologies.

Non-human agency

» Humanist anthropocentrism says that only human beings are intentional actors, and thus have agency.

» But it now seems unclear (1) just how special "consciousness" is, and (2) who might have it.

» Moreover, it seems unclear that agency requires consciousness.

See Eliza.

What are examples of nonhuman agency?

Cyborgs

Biology and evolutionary theory over the last two centuries have simultaneously produced modern organisms as objects of knowledge and reduced the line between humans and animals to a faint trace re-etched in ideological struggle or professional disputes between life and social science.
The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signalling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling.
— Donna Haraway, *Cyborg Manifesto* (152)

Animal-machine distinction

The second leaky distinction is between animal-human (organism) and machine. Pre-cybernetic machines could be haunted; there was always the spectre of the ghost in the machine. This dualism structured die dialogue between materialism and idealism that was settled by a dialectical progeny, called spirit or history, according to taste. But basically machines were not self-moving, self-designing, autonomous. They could not achieve man's dream, only mock it. They were not man, an author to himself, but only a caricature of that masculinist reproductive dream. To think they were otherwise was paranoid. Now we are not so sure. Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert. (152)