The need for anthropology and the three crises of globalisation

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Although ethnographic fieldwork is by far the most accurate of all the methods available to social science, its limitations have always been apparent. Ethnography is enormously deep and broad in its command of human life–worlds, but it can equally well be said that it lacks both depth and breadth, that is historical depth and societal breadth. This has been known since Malinowski, or perhaps I should say nearly since Malinowski, since he insisted on ‘seeing the world in a grain of sand’, to quote William Blake, and rarely ventured beyond his own ethnography in his anthropological analyses. Most of his students stayed faithful to this virtue, or perhaps vice, rarely allowing statistics, macrosociology or historical sources to bear on their analyses. Yet already two decades before the Malinowskian revolution, Boas had to rely on recent historical sources for his reconstruction of the then obsolete potlatch ceremonies on the northwestern coast, and Marcel Mauss, who never did fieldwork himself, drew on a variety of sources, historical and contemporary, anecdotal and thorough as the case might be, in his learned essays in comparative sociology. Indeed, in his famous essay on the gift, Mauss demonstrated, in his polite way, the shortcomings of Malinowski's methodology by indicating the broader regional and comparative significance of the kula. Mauss was not well travelled, but he was rather well read.
Especially in the second half of the twentieth century, social and cultural anthropologists made various attempts to connect their high-octane, but limited material to large-scale systems and historical processes. In the introduction to an almost forgotten edited volume from the mid-1960s, Geertz (1963) pointed out that no matter where they went in those days – the era of decolonisation, that is – anthropologists were likely to come across expressions of nationalism and were thus obliged to take its local effects into account. Around the same time, Gluckman edited Open Systems, Closed Minds which, among other things, showed how traditional peoples were now enmeshed in large-scale social systems of which they were often unaware. Eric Wolf's Europe and the People Without History (1982), a superb anthropological history of colonialism, indicated how the ethnographic gaze, when applied to an unfamiliar field, could lead to an epistemological shift with political implications as well as the merely academic ones. These are some of the high points of 20th century anthropological attempts to deal with the broader issues of society and history, but the dilemma is even more acutely felt today and urgently needs to be dealt with lest anthropology loses its relevance outside of anthropology departments. It is not good enough, I shall argue, to sing the praises of high-quality ethnography; it now needs to be fully integrated with kinds of knowledge not based on first-hand observation or conversations. And this now, goes for all anthropology since the world is currently integrated, divided perhaps by a shared destiny, but the practice of seeing a people or a place through the lens of ethnography only, which was always questionable, has now become indefensible.

This may be a trivial point, but there is something at stake which may have profound significance for the fortunes of anthropology as an intellectual discipline. Although our discipline is thriving, especially quantitatively but also qualitatively, at the end of the day it is
perceived as much less relevant than it was one or two generations ago, when we were still 'peddlers of the exotic' who brought fresh stories, paradoxes and perspectives demonstrating the diversity of humankind precisely because we studied people whose history was separate from our own and whose integration into global systems was patchy at the most. This is no longer the case, and as a result, anthropology seems to have lost its place in the sun. Current intellectual debates about say, human nature, multiculturalism and migration, or the spread of neoliberalism, seem to manage reasonably well without us. Now that we can no longer offer strange stories about exotic people, there seems to be no need for us. Yet this is not true. If anthropology has lost its place in intellectual debate, it is the responsibility of anthropologists. A certain amount of cocooning has doubtless been going on, but there is also something about the way in which anthropologists depict complexity which makes it difficult to communicate to others. It is rarely easy to respond to the question "What have you found out?" when asked about your research. If I may say so, anthropological monographs tend to be strikingly rich and just as inconclusive.

There is a standard literature on globalisation intended for policymakers, businesspeople, travellers and the reading classes in general; and there is an academic literature which sometimes has an influence which goes beyond the seminar room. I'm thinking about writers such as Manuel Castells and Zygmunt Bauman, representing opposite ends of the spectrum, and you could add George Ritzer with his 'McDonaldization of society' theory. Although we see our accounts as superior, anthropologists somehow rarely make it across to others these days.

The shortcomings of what I call the standard literature on globalisation or transnational connections are obvious: They tend to
be based on a neoliberal conceptualisation of the person, they are incapable of portraying irreducible diversity and blind to the culturally embedded understandings and therefore producing misleading accounts. This literature focuses singlemindedly on the production of similarity, on those aspects of globalisation which create common denominators, mobility and interconnectedness across the world. To anthropologists, such facts provide starting-points for an exploration of diversity, not a conclusion or even an interesting finding in itself. There is a sense in which, in mainstream intellectual discourse, the Other was initially seen as radically different and inferior; when cultural relativism became fashionable, the other was at least in principle seen as radically different but equal; today, precisely because of the widespread ingestion of a banal and superficial analysis of globalisation, the other is increasingly seen as a member of a shared ethical space and therefore someone eligible for conversion to neoliberalism and criticism for clinging to obsolete and objectionable traditions.

Like Geertz in 1965, it may safely be said that hardly any anthropologist today can go to a place, no matter how remote, that is not being affected by the forces of technological and economic globalisation – perhaps I should be so bold as to say neoliberal globalisation. This is probably what Lévi–Strauss had in mind when, on the eve of his 100th birthday, he complained to the then French president Nicholas Sarkozy that ‘le monde est trop plein’: The small stateless peoples to whom Lévi–Strauss had devoted a lifetime of study were all but gone – incorporated, against their will, into states and monetary systems of production and exchange. Instead the world, now teeming with people – seven billion compared to two billion at the time of the great French anthropologist's birth – in which capitalism and modernity had long been dominant, now seemed to be a town, or
global village, playing a single game. As the American journalist
Thomas Friedman has it, the global playing field has been levelled.
Already in 1955, Lévi–Strauss complained that

Now that the Polynesian islands have been smothered in concrete and turned into aircraft carriers solidly anchored in the southern seas, when the whole of Asia is beginning to look like a dingy suburb, when shanty towns are spreading across Africa, when civil and military aircraft blight the primeval innocence of the American or Melanesian forests even before destroying their virginity, what else can the so-called escapism of travelling do than confront us with the more unfortunate aspects of our history? (Lévi–Strauss 1978a [1955]: 43)

adding for good measure, regarding the culturally hybrid but undeniably modern people of the cities in the New World, that they had taken the journey directly from barbarism to decadence without passing through civilization. But compare this statement to Malinowski’s lament in 1922. The very opening words of the book that was to change the course of anthropology read as follows:

Ethnology is in the sadly ludicrous, not to say tragic, position, that at the very moment when it begins to put its workshop in order, to forge its proper tools, to start ready for work on its appointed task, the material of its study melts away with hopeless rapidity. Just now, when the methods and aims of scientific field ethnology have taken shape, when men fully trained for the work have begun to travel into savage countries and study their inhabitants – these die away under our very eyes. (1984 [1922], p. xv)
Disenchantment and disillusion resulting from the presumed loss of radical cultural difference is an integral part of anthropological enquiry, and so it has been for at least a hundred years. At the same time, we continue to explore diversity in this interconnected, overheated world of ours, though today this has to be undertaken under new and ever changing circumstances.

Just as Mauss, Boas and Kroeber sought to place their ethnographic details on the broader canvas of human cultural history, it is required of us today to make our small, compact, detailed ethnographies speak to larger issues; and for a variety of reasons, partly suggested above, some of those pressing issues, regarding which anthropology could and should have a greater impact, are to do with the implications of the interconnectedness of the contemporary world. Now, since the term ‘globalisation’ came into fashion around 1990, many anthropologists have made important critical contributions to making sense of it, but it is my contention, without going into any detail here and now, that notwithstanding the superior quality of much of this work, there is a sense in which it tends to speak only to anthropologists. I have long wondered why, and I think it may be due to the way in which the ethnography is presented, somehow simultaneously too rich and too poor to be understood and seen as relevant outside our own discipline: too rich in detail, too poor in context and connections to other domains of enquiry and empirical facts.

My contention is that in a world where the very existence of irreducible cultural difference is being questioned, the contribution of anthropology is even more important – intellectually, politically, existentially – than it was in the mid-twentieth century, when we were seen as slightly quaint, but always fascinating peddlers of the exotic. Let me give a few brief examples to indicate what I have in mind.
1. Since cultural differences are generally seen as something that can easily be learnt on a weekend course, of the generic ‘how to do business with the Saudis’ kind, most medical doctors who give advice to immigrant couples have no training in intercultural communication. Because inheritable diseases occur among immigrants where cousin marriage is common, Pakistanis in Norway are offered genetic counselling to determine whether or not it would be recommendable for them to have children. One of the first questions asked by the adviser is whether they are related. If the answer is no, she simply continues down her list. An anthropologist was needed to point out that being related means something different in Punjab from in Norway; if, for example, two persons have grown up in different countries, they are not seen as related even if they have common grandparents.

2. During a protracted debate about the relative merits of social constructivism a couple of years ago, I belatedly discovered that my opponent, who dismissed constructivism as unscientific mumbo-jumbo, was an internationally recognised expert on HIV-AIDS and a member of powerful advisory boards dealing with the problem in southern Africa. This made me think about some cultural notions about AIDS common in South Africa. Thabo Mbeki, the former president, doubted the connection between HIV and AIDS. His health minister recommended the use of olive oil if infected, to prevent the disease from breaking out. Some men believed that sexual intercourse with a virgin would transfer the virus to them. In certain villages in KwaZulu Natal, it was widely believed that when a certain species of black bird came to roost in the trees outside the village, this was an indication of the arrival of HIV-AIDS to the village. Many believe the ultimate cause is magic or sorcery. At the end of the day, I was left pondering if this medical expert on AIDS had never considered the
possible relevance of such social constructions for the advice he gave to international organisations.

3. Global warming has so far been more perceptible and dramatic in the Arctic regions than anywhere else. The inhabitants of Greenland and Nunavut, however, do not see what they could do to slow down the changes. They are perfectly aware that their carbon footprint is minimal, and – unlike many other indigenous populations – they know that billions of people will have to change their ways of life if man-made climate change is to be stopped. Their reaction therefore consists in adaptation. They change their fishing and hunting habits and will, if need be, shift to new species of fish and game. Some Greenlanders are in fact pleased to report that they may soon be cultivating potatoes and cereals.

4. The majority of the urban population in the world probably depends fully or partly on the informal sector for their survival. In poor areas of cities in the global South, hardly anybody has jobs, but they have a bit of money and struggle to be consumers of the kind they have seen on TV. What people actually do is not what the World Bank believes that they do. Looking at the GDP of a country like Gambia would lead to the conclusion that virtually nobody can afford the male goat required for local Muslim feast known as Tabaski in West Africa (Eid al–Adha elsewhere), but somehow every family manages to acquire one. The transactions making this possible take place below the radar of the state, the Bretton Woods institutions and the international NGOs, but can be discovered by anthropologists. It is no coincidence that the very concept of the informal sector was introduced by an anthropologist who had simply walked around the marketplace in Accra, Ghana while on a consultancy for the UN, idly wondering what people were up to there and making his observations (Hart 1973).
I still haven't even mentioned the importance of religion, although I probably should: A large proportion of the world's population live in a world where everything has a meaning, where nothing happens merely by chance, and where destiny, God or witchcraft are essential components. Failure to understand this reduces them to neoliberal consumers, which they may naturally look like, but only at a superficial level. In general, things are not what they seem. There are barrios in Latin American cities where the inhabitants would rather trust a drug dealer than a social worker, and there are Italians who'd rather lend their neighbour money than pay income tax to the state. Who do people trust – or what do people trust? There is an often neglected, but crucial difference between a what and a who in this regard, analogous to the contrast between the formal and the informal sector, which in turn resembles the old and partly discredited contrast between great and little traditions. This contrast goes beyond the often mentioned difference between what people say and what they do, because it reveals differences in the conceptualisation of the relationship between person and society.

The strengths of ethnography are obvious in all the aforementioned examples. The question is how to make these insights relevant in the same way as climate research is made relevant in politics, Kantian transcendental philosophy for law or biochemistry for evolutionary theory. The short answer is to insist on the virtues of ethnography while learning from others, and in the case of globalisation this has to mean integrating ethnography with cultural history and macrosociology.

What else does anthropology have to contribute? In addition to ethnography, we can offer the comparative method, and a methodological advantage of global connectedness – for research – is the fact that the integrative processes of the last century or so have created a number of conceptual bridgeheads, or common
denominators, making global comparisons meaningful, irrespective of philosophical or epistemological positions. How do people in different localities understand and act upon the global crises concerning the environment, identity and the economy? What is at stake locally? Which interests are involved? What does this mean to the people in question? And how does one locality differ from another in trying to handle crises which are ultimately global?

To illustrate the argument, I shall now give you an outline of the research project which provided the title of this lecture, and which constitutes an attempt to make anthropology speak to some of the urgent issues confronting nearly all seven billion of us: the chronic or recurrent crises of the world economy, climate change and environmental destruction, and tensions concerning the relationship between similarity and difference, or autonomy and dependence. A main objective of this research is to develop a more credible alternative to the hegemonic discourse about globalisation seen as something which takes place at an unspecified macro level and creates uniformity.

The underlying assumption of my current research project is that the three global – recurrent or chronic – crises of the economy, the environment and cultural identity are being experienced, and dealt with, almost everywhere in the world. I am in the process of hiring four to five anthropologists who will carry out fieldwork in locations which are structurally differently related to the globalisation processes, ranging from an OECD country to a totally peripheral one, showing the diversity of responses to pressing questions often analysed by journalists and other social scientists as if they were uniform. Since reality is created through the interaction of individuals, networks and communities with their wider environments, the crises as such are bound to differ from place to place. Mining takes place in both Queensland and in upland Sierra Leone, but it is not the same thing in
these two locations. Glaciers melt in the Peruvian Andes and in Greenland, but local responses are strikingly different. Financial bubbles burst and create unemployment in South Korea as well as in Greece, but local understandings and reactions differ. In many Muslim countries, it is a common assumption that the recurrent global financial crises are a hoax created by the Americans and Israelis to strengthen their grip on the world economy, and YouTube videos allegedly demonstrating this can easily be found.

Faced with the perceptible and sometimes dramatic impact of local events which have their origin in distant lands, people everywhere experience a crisis of reproduction: economically, culturally and environmentally, they see their viability as who they are as being threatened. They are confronted with their own vulnerability, begin to doubt who – or what – they can trust (a crucial distinction, by the way) and develop a heightened awareness of risk. Whether they adapt and adjust, protest or delink is an empirical question; but the crises of globalisation are not one kind of phenomenon, and they can only be studied as local processes.

If anthropology can be said to be the study of human diversity, and I think it can, then the game is still on, as always under circumstances that are continuously shifting.