Anthropology At The Crossroads:

From The Age Of Ethnography To The Age Of World Systems¹ 1998

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As we approach the millennium the discipline of anthropology occupies a highly contested terrain, a battle-ground on which scientific, humanistic, political-economic, and postmodern agendas are putting forth conflicting claims and vying for hegemony (Lee 1992). One reading of anthropology is that it is a part of the discredited canon constructed by dead white males, architects and apologists for capitalism and imperialism. But despite the vogue for anthropology-bashing in some circles, I believe that quite different readings are possible and I would like to present one here. Anthropology's brief history as a discipline has been marked by both successes and failures. It is commonplace to say it is a discipline in crisis; but one could argue that this has been true of its entire history. What I would like to do is give you a personal view of some of its strengths and weaknesses; where the discipline has come from and where it is going. If I have anything to add to the usual ruminations on this subject it is that I feel that anthropology's *politics* are as much a part of its history and future as is its bodies of method, theory, and knowledge. The paper will draw examples from anthropology generally but the main line of march is to use a broad overview of the crisis and transformation in anthropology as a point of departure to examine aspects of South African society in the first post-Apartheid years.

Regarding the discipline as a whole my thesis is this: anthropology is undergoing a transformation that is pregnant with possibilities, but to paraphrase Gramsci: whenever the old order is dying and the new struggling

to be born, morbid symptoms may appear. I will argue that the present state of anthropology bears out Gramsci's epigram.

I will speak about the state of anthropology in the U.S. and Canada where I was trained and where I work. I can appreciate that South Africa is more within the British sphere of influence but perhaps South African readers will find refreshing an paper that doesn't take as a starting point Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. Of course anthropology as a discipline has become global in scope. The cutting edge is as likely to be found outside the metropolis as within it, and I will argue that South Africa offers some of the most telling illustrations of the major trends in anthropological inquiry in the 1990s.

But first what about those dead white males? Here is how I would attempt to position anthropology within the larger intellectual project of capitalist modernity. The complex changes that accompanied the rise of capitalism as a world system and of modernity, its cultural counterpart, have affected the entire planet. Together they have literally been a world creator and world destroyer. Anthropology carved out for itself an interesting niche in the division of labour of 20th century intellectual life. While an entire set of disciplines - economics, political science, sociology and psychology - sprung up to study and manage the capitalist system in the Metropolis, anthropology's role was to be a different one.

In its simplest terms, to use a phrase of one of my mentors, the late Kathleen Gough, anthropology emerged as a child of imperialism (1968; 1993). The Imperial project needed a better understanding of the bewildering variety of human societies in the conquered lands and this role anthropology filled admirably, classifying, ordering, describing, the languages, material cultures, kinship systems, and belief systems; the whole panoply of what we now like to call, somewhat pretentiously, *The Other*.

However, anthropology did not fulfil its promise. Initially recruited to grease the wheels of imperialism, in fact, the anthropologists, to their credit, quickly became more a thorn in the side of imperialism than a handmaiden. Economists and political scientists, as the social science disciplines with the strongest organic links to the power elites of the western establishment, purveyed the prevailing wisdom of the day: racial differences were a given, and Social Darwinism provided a thinly disguised justification for dispossession and subjugation of indigenous peoples. Even the more enlightened wing of the imperial project --in dealing with the Non-European

races - put forward the self-serving argument that since the West was superior in all matters, by getting the natives to work for low wages and become docile subjects of the crown, the imperialists were actually doing them a favour! As empirically wrong and as self-serving as we know it to be today, this was the prevailing wisdom.²

But anthropologists, by-and-large, did not buy into it. Anthropologists were rarely so close to the centres of power: because they worked at the grass roots, in a face-to-face relationship with the rank-and-file and their everyday life, they saw what the more organically-linked intellectuals of imperialism could not see or denied: the essential humanity of *The Other* and the wisdom of alternative ways of life. Thus Anthropologists became, if not anti-imperialists, at least advocates for the downtrodden, pleading their case in the corridors of power (and usually being ignored), and generally becoming what I would call part of the left-wing of the imperial project during the period 1900-1960.³

Social science at the turn of the 20th century was saturated with racist assumptions and theories. Perhaps anthropology's most useful contribution, at least in North America, was the adoption of an anti-racist political program. This started as a counter to the suffocating ethnocentrism of the day. Later it would grow into a movement that involved combating racism in all its forms. The most powerful legacy of Franz Boas, founder of anthropology at Columbia University, was the doctrine of cultural relativism and the argument that race, language and culture, varied independently, as presented in his 1911 book of the same name. There were no simple cultures or simple languages; each culture was valid in its own terms; each had the capacity to meet the needs of its members; some perhaps did this even better than the cultures of the West. Boas' method was broadly "scientific". He had been trained as a geographer, and taught his students the importance of careful data collection, informed by testable hypotheses.⁴ The ethnographic method - study at the ground-level - became the hallmark of anthropological research and set this work apart from the number-crunching of sociologists and the top-down institutional analyses of political scientists and economists.

At its best, the anthropology of the first two thirds of the twentieth century has been acutely aware of the historical conjuncture, bearing witness to the tremendous diversity of culture, the vast treasures of human experience that lay outside (as well as inside) the orbit of Europe; what

Claude Levi-Strauss called "the ingeniousness, diversity and imagination of our species - qualities of which evidence would soon be lost forever" (1968:349).

In the 1960s and 70s, anthropology departments in the U.S. led the fight against the Vietnam war. The Teach-In Movement, which led to mass mobilisation on college and university campuses, was founded by the Department of Anthropology at the University of Michigan. Year after year the American Anthropological Association at its annual meetings tirelessly waged political battles against the war, and one of the key turning points in the ideological fight against the legitimacy of the war was a famous paper written by Eric Wolf and Joe Jorgensen exposing complicity of scholars in the dirty war in Thailand (1970).

On a personal note, it was this outspoken anti-racism and the open advocacy of the cause of humanity that drew me into anthropology in the 1960s. I was strongly drawn to the possibilities of observing the wonder of the infinite varieties of the human spirit, and the Kalahari desert of then Bechuanaland was about as far from Wall Street and the centres of state power as one could possibly get (or so I thought). I was privileged to work with the Ju/'hoansi of the Dobe area for three years between 1963 and 1969; and tried to bear witness to the richness of their hunting and gathering lifeways (Lee 1979, 1993, etc.).

Since then I have watched their rapid incorporation into the Botswana state and the regional political economy. The Ju/'hoansi as well as the rest of us have lived through an extraordinary period of human history. History has accelerated with unprecedented speed and the world in many ways has become a much more tightly integrated space. While I will return to the Ju/'hoansi in a moment, I would like to focus now on the impact of recent history on the discipline of anthropology.

Throughout the century, social and cultural anthropology displayed a certain coherence, but one could discern within it two divergent wings or tendencies that could be conventionally labelled the *scientific* and the *humanistic*, following the lead of C.P. Snow's famous essay on "The Two Cultures" (1959). The first modelled itself after the natural sciences and consciously sought to build better theory on more and more precise observations.⁵ The latter's intellectual affinities were more particularistic and interpretative, with ties to the historical, linguistic, and literary disciplines.⁶

The coherence came from the fact that both wings shared a common core of method and theory: the world consisted of relatively discrete unit cultures, each with its particular constellation of material means, organisational forms and systems of meaning. The method of ethnography - broadly defined - was the means by which anthropologists made sense of these cultures. A second area of understanding was generated by anthropology's initial role in the intellectual division of labour; anthropologists tended to take as their subject matter the non-metropolitan, non-western, non-industrial and non-state societies of the world. This became anthropology's peculiar province of study because, as Alfred L. Kroeber once observed with his famed sense of irony, no one else would take them seriously (1948). Anthropologists took them very seriously indeed, producing detailed monographs on single "cultures". If the early ethnographers could be faulted, it would be for their tendency to zero in on the cultural details at the expense of understanding the broader historical and regional contexts in which the unit cultures were situated. But by approaching these unit cultures from a basic stance of respect and even admiration, anthropologists worked to valorise these cultures and established their legitimacy as members of the human family.

In the 1980s and 90s a sea change has overtaken the discipline and has thrown into question these common understandings. While the spectre of postmodernism haunts the academy, postmodernism is only one part of the sea-change. Less heralded but of equal import has been the move to political economy initiated by Eric Wolf's important book *Europe and the Peoples without History* (1982).

While retaining anthropology's basic attitude of respect for non-western cultures, Wolf's book and the school that has grown up around his approach⁷ challenge the notion that the subject matter of anthropology is the discrete unit-cultures of the world. Political economy undermines the assumption of the integrity of unit cultures; in its place Wolf and others see interconnectedness as the watchword: they see the impact of tributary formations, mercantilism, and imperialism on the world's cultures as much earlier and much more profound than has been acknowledged. Whereas an older generation of anthropologists built their knowledge of the "other" on detailed ethnographies of societies assumed to be more or less autonomous, the work of the political economists tended to portray these same societies as participants in complex regional and international economic and social

systems and power blocs.⁸ In a rapidly emerging world order where all work for wages and watch the same TV programs, who can be considered non-industrial or non-state?

Political economy has made important contributions to the anthropological study of society and is indispensable in coming to grips with the rapidly globalizing world of the present. But it has led to some excesses and distortions. In assessing the impact of *Europe and the People without History*, Marshall Sahlins has recently written:

Eric Wolf is compelled to argue that attention must be paid to [colonised and "peripheral" peoples] that they are in fact historical beings, somebody more than 'victims and silent witnesses' of their own subjugation. Wolf was moved to say so because in the headier days of World System theory it had seemed that there was nothing left for anthropology to do but the global ethnography of capitalism. Yet why is it that in Wolf's magisterial book the same kind of thing happens? One searches here in vain for a sustained analysis of how local peoples attempt to organise what is afflicting them in their own cultural terms. Wolf invites us to see the Mundurucu and the Meo as historic agents, but what he actually shows is how they 'were drawn into the larger system to suffer its impact and become its agents' (1994:414-15, Sahlins' emphasis).

On Kalahari Revisionism

One southern African example drawn from my own work will illustrate what is at issue. In the Kalahari I had documented the hunting and gathering way of life of the Dobe Ju/'hoansi, a people who, though by 1950 means isolated, lived largely independently on their wild food resources into the 1960s (1979). E. Wilmsen (1989) disagreed with this view and put forward the argument that their status as hunter-gatherers was an illusion. Instead he portrayed them as devolved pastoralists, long dominated pre-colonially by regional African centres of power. The impact of merchant capital, he argued, was early and devastating, further transforming the Ju/'hoansi, who having lost their cattle became hunter-gatherers only in the 1890s. This revisionist view struck a chord in the emerging postmodern intellectual climate, and became influential, despite having little empirical evidence to support it and strong evidence against it.⁹ Recent archaeological and archival research has tended to support the Ju/'hoansi's strongly articulated sense of their own pre-colonial autonomy (Lee 1997a, Smith & Lee 1997, Günther 1993, 1996; Sadr 1997).

If revisionist views rest on such dubious evidence in what lies their attraction to a generation of scholars? The emergence of revisionist views of cultures like the Ju/'hoansi needs to be understood against the background of the times. It is not a coincidence that at the very moment that this view of culture was coming to prominence, the traditional subject matter of anthropology - peoples like the Ju/'hoansi - were disappearing with the speed of light into the farms, fields, and factories of the New World Order, while the numerically larger and already more integrated peoples like the Bemba, the Kikuyu, the Minankabau, were rapidly forging national (rather than tribal) identities and becoming economic players within their respective nation-states. Given the rapidity of these changes and the apparent omnipresence of the World System it is hard to imagine the possibility of autonomous societies.

Accompanying these developments has been the impact of the postmodern turn on the broad front of the social sciences. Postmodernism is not a unitary phenomenon. It is an amalgam of French post-structuralism and deconstruction, literary criticism, continental philosophies like phenomenology and a lot of home-grown American middle-class intellectual angst (Jameson 1984; Dews 1987; Palmer 1990).

The founding charter of anthropological postmodernism is Foucault's radically sceptical view that there is no truth, only regimes of truth and power, and that all scholarship (including anthropological scholarship) is powerfully shaped by the cultural constructions of the observer (1976a). Thus ethnographic writing has more in common with the historical novel and other works of fiction than it has with a scientific treatise (Sperber 1985, Wagner 1981). Kalahari revisionism for example argues that the Ju/'hoansi were portrayed as hunter-gatherers, not because they *were* such, but because this portrayal served some ideological agenda.

A more moderate version of postmodernism can be discerned in the influential argument from phenomenology that knowledge is socially constructed (Berger 1980). The social constructivists argue that knowledge is shaped by ideological forces affecting the observer: an important idea. The constructivists enjoin us critically to reflect on the writer as author and the social context in which s/he writes. They also acknowledge that ethnographies are narratives and this quality affects the way ethnographic writing is received. All of these are commendable. But constructivism has a

downside: the tendency to shift the locus of inquiry from the observed to the observer and her/his biases and influences. The social reality being portrayed becomes secondary, thus obviating the need to evaluate the truth claims being put forward (Lee in press b).

If you accept either the strong or the weak form of this general argument, the task of ethnography becomes immeasurably more problematic; truth is at best partial, flawed, obscured, and above all *relative*.¹⁰ This argument has radical implications for methodology. The production of knowledge has left the realm of empirical investigation and analytical methods of the past can no longer be relied upon. Boas' method lies in ruins, and the idea that what we are doing is science becomes unfashionable, if not heretical.

Much of the current popularity of postmodernism in my view can be traced to two sources: first, the historical conjuncture: the appearance and spread of a global homogenising capitalist culture that imposed sameness on difference (Harvey 1985) and, second, a major ideological offensive by right wing intellectuals appealing to the disillusioned and featuring critiques of Marxism and the failures of the Soviet system. In its extreme form it has led to grandiose talk about the triumph of capitalism and "the end of History" (Fukuyama and others; see Dews 1987).¹¹

Political Economy and Postmodernism

Now we come to an interesting paradox. The political economic school of the followers of Eric Wolf expresses a total lack of sympathy for postmodernism, and the pages of the journals are filled with debates between the two (e.g. Polier and Roseberry 1993). Yet there is an interesting convergence between the political economists and postmodernists. For very different reasons, both argue the extraordinary proposition that non-western people are not what they appear to be; both put into question the assumption that anthropology whatever it may be, studies the "Other".

The political economists argue that the so-called "natives" are to all intents like Euroamericans, because relations of domination and/or merchant capital have spanned the globe and therefore tributary or mercantilist or capitalist relations of production have transformed the "other" into people like ourselves, as parts of larger systems with hierarchies, commodities, exploitation and other inequities. Postmodernists take the view that because anthropologists (like everyone else) are prisoners of their own ideology, as a

consequence they can see in the "Other" only a flawed perception of themselves. Thus in either scenario, the "other" is declared a non-category.

Political economists and postmodernists may make strange bedfellows, but if their shared position merits serious consideration (I think it does) then yet another major tenet of anthropology from Franz Boas forward - that anthropology is the study of difference - becomes untenable. Or if "difference" is to be preserved as an anthropological problematic, then anthropology becomes the study of difference mutually constructed by powerful masters and powerless subalterns within a single world-system, in Sahlins' terms "a global ethnography of capitalism."

Looking at contemporary scholarship it seems at times that there is an unseemly scramble to show just how shallow, contrived or spurious this or that culture's claims to authenticity really are. It seems as if no one will go broke appealing to the cynicism and disillusionment of intellectuals in the era of late capitalism (Sloterdijk 1987).

The tragedy of this deeply flawed position, is that it starts from very legitimate premises. Let me illustrate the point with a few examples.

In *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) the Marxist historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger show how allegedly hallowed customs handed down from the past are in fact the product of recent history. In his method of Deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, who also claims affinities to Marx, has argued that history is akin to a literary text and like all texts is ultimately unknowable (1976, 1978). It seems a short step to transposing a critical and debunking discourse to all anthropological subjects. But along the way there has been a slippage. The tools of deconstruction, developed to debunk and call into question the high and mighty, are now being applied to the powerless. Where the invention of tradition perspective was initially deployed to deconstruct the public rituals of the 19th century British Monarchy or pomp and circumstance in colonial India, it was now being generalised to question the claims to authenticity of small peoples.¹²

In his influential work *The Predicament of Culture* James Clifford shows how the Mashpee Indians of Massachusetts construct their identity *de novo* in order to meet the exigencies of a court case (Clifford 1988). Similar arguments (but with less sympathy for the subalterns) have been made for the Maori by Hanson (1989) and for the ancient Hawaiians by Bergendorff.

Hasager, and Henriques (1988; see also the reply by Sahlins 1989, and the book by Obesekere 1993).¹³

Foucault's famous dictum (1976a, 1976b) that there is no truth, only regimes of truth and power, was originally intended as a critique of arbitrary power by aggrandising states and their minions, but by showing the fragility of all truth-claims it has had the effect of undermining the legitimacy as well of oppositional movements for justice against these same powers (Taylor 1984, Habermas 1987).

Of course there is a kernel of truth to the idea that all societies in the world are products of interaction with other societies and world society. Modern ethnography is a product of the Enlightenment and is a form of practice in which members of our academic subculture observe the other and, as mentioned at the outset, Kathleen Gough reminded us of anthropology's roots as a child of imperialism.

Nevertheless to succumb to the enticements of the postmodernists/revisionists would be a disaster, not the least on the political front. Where I part company with them is their view that our knowledge of the other - being filtered through perceptions, language, and culture - is so suspect that subjects can only be provisionally and arbitrarily constructed. Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen in a now classic paper (1989) have insightfully argued that it is striking how the largely male, white, and Western postmodernists are proclaiming the death of the subject, precisely at the moment when alternative voices - women, people of colour, Third World and aboriginal peoples - are struggling to constitute themselves as subjects of history, as the makers of their own history.¹⁴ I will return to this point below.

For the moment let me say this: I do not believe that anthropologists are nearly so powerless before the awesome task of representing the other's reality, or that the ethnography of the 1960s or 70s was so flawed that it has to be discarded. Adam Kuper, in a recent critique of postmodernism (1993), points out that the methodologies of the 1960s were not so very different from those of the present, and that their results were subjected to the critical scrutiny of peer review and comparative evidence. Kuper argues, and I would agree, that the view that ethnographic writing is more akin to fiction than it is to science, does not accord with the history of the discipline. If the ethnographers of that not-so-distant era had passed off their fiction as science their readership and their peers would not have stood for it. (For

other critiques of "postmodernism" which attempt to reconstruct the "realist" foundations of social science epistemologies see Wylie 1992a, 1992b, in press; Roth 1989; Sangren 1988; Gellner 1988; Lovibond 1989; Soper 1991; Bhashkar 1979, 1986. See also O'Meara 1989).

The Acceleration of History

I believe that there is a deeper principle at work here, fuelling both postmodernism and some of the work of the political economists: the acceleration of history. We are living through a period in which historical time itself is changing; as the modern system continues to grow, things are moving faster and faster. Events and processes that unfolded over centuries are compressed into decades or years, and what transpired on a scale of years now unfolds in the space of months or weeks (Harvey 1985:6-35). We need to put the revisionist debate and the state of anthropology today in the context of this recent history.

Not everyone within social anthropology has paused to reflect on the titanic forces that are transforming the world before our eyes. The era of late capitalism is witnessing the accumulation of capital on an unprecedented scale, the dominance of the multinational corporation, and the phenomenal growth of the state and media as apparatuses for shaping and controlling human behaviour (Chomsky 1989; Ewen 1976). In addition one must try to comprehend the accelerating and expanding networks of information transfer on a world scale. Through television, e-mail, modems, cellular phones, fax and other technologies it is possible to touch any part of the world in seconds, and through these same media we can dispose of all the world's accumulated knowledge and images with the push of a button; what Frederic Jameson has called "a decentred global network of microcircuits and blinking lights" (see also Lyotard 1984).

It is not surprising that this power of instantaneous communication, combined with the vast output of the culture industries, and the centralising power of the State, leads to fantasies of omniscience and omnipotence for the small minority of the world's population which has access to such tools (Berman 1983). Late capitalism consumes the past with amazing rapidity, spews it out with such dizzying speed that it has the effect of obliterating the past, including the past of even 20 years ago. All these processes tend to

endow the force of capitalism with a mystique of enormous reach and totalizing power¹⁵.

Externally, the spread of world-wide capitalism, sporadic and localised in the 18th century, a flood in the 19th and early 20th century, has become an veritable avalanche in the last third of the 20th century. As John Bodley, Shelton Davis, and others have pointed out, the world's so-called tribal peoples are sitting directly in the path of the world's largest multinational corporations (Bodley 1982, 1988; Davis 1977; see also Jorgensen 1990). The scale of this penetration has increased in many cases by orders of magnitude in ten or twenty years. To take an example, when I first arrived in Maun, Botswana in 1963 there was a single tour operator taking tourists into the Okavango Swamps. Today there are over eighty operators; many of them offer to take clients to meet the last of the River Bushmen, a man who now gets "discovered" forty or fifty times a year. The Dobe area in 1963-4 was even more isolated than the Okavango Swamps. In that era it received one motor vehicle visit every 4 to 6 weeks, for a total of 9 to 13 vehicles per year. In 1987 I counted a vehicle *every four to six hours* for an annual total 1400 to 2100, a one-to-two hundred fold increase.

Similar examples could be drawn from virtually any part of the First, Second, or Third Worlds. Everywhere indigenous peoples are being rapidly absorbed into the farms and slums of the New World Order. This is the context of accelerating and massive change in which social anthropology is situated and this is the source of the crisis of representation that the field is undergoing.

The point I want to emphasise is that field workers who arrived for example, in the Kalahari in the 1980s and 90s and observed social breakdown and appalling conditions, found it unbelievable that 30, 20, or even 10 years earlier, observers could have found a society like the Ju/'hoansi with band structure, kinship, and subsistence patterns still functioning. Instead of reflecting on the magnitude of the changes in that 10 or 20 year period, revisionists immediately assume that the earlier studies were wrong and they go on to blithely project the contemporary patterns of destruction and/or outside domination back into the past.

A recent study of the Kagga Kamma Bushmen by Hylton White (1995) documents the complex history of a people who, displaced from their homes in the Kalahari by the Group Areas Act and other indignities, now survive by

performing for tourists in a Bushman theme park near Ceres, in the Cedarburg mountains. White's otherwise excellent study suffers from the implied assumption that all contemporary Bushmen have experienced the same tortuous history of exploitation and exile as the Kagga Kamma people. What is a minor flaw in White's work becomes magnified in Wilmsen's book, *Land filled with Flies* (1989); both seem to me to be examples of the error of universalising the present, the obverse of the equally flawed history which postulates pristine hunter-gatherers roaming the veld the year before the anthropologist arrives. While the latter view has correctly come in for a wave of criticism, it could be argued that the revisionists' willingness to project the present on to the past indicates an enchantment with the power of capital that is at base, no less romantic and uncritical as the much-criticised enchantment with the pristine/ primitive other.

The danger of the revisionist position if generally adopted is that it would erase from anthropology the richness and diversity expressed by the vast kaleidoscope of world cultures, and replace it with a uniform shade of grey, the colour of universal oppression of the capitalist world system.

What is to be done?

What is the remedy for the present malaise in anthropology? It is deeply unfortunate that some anthropologists have repudiated both anthropology's empirical roots and its historic mission of bearing witness to the richness and diversity of the non-western "other". This is an honourable part of anthropology's past and should not be sloughed off lightly. It is true that capitalism's impact has been powerful, but it is not *that* powerful, and it has affected parts of the world at different times in vastly different ways. Sahlins, for example, devotes a considerable part of his essay quoted above to show that for several centuries the West's terms of trade with China distinctly favoured the latter, the source of enormous drain on the silver accounts of the European financial establishment. Only by fomenting the Opium Wars of 1839-40 were the London bankers finally able to gain access to the closely guarded and extremely lucrative Chinese markets (1994).

The Kalahari offers more modest examples but the processes are similar. The Kagga Kamma story is one of displacement and destruction, but the Dobe Ju/'hoansi 1000 km. to the north successfully escaped the worst effects

of colonisation at least until the late 1960s. The Dobe area Ju/'hoansi and other San groups held the colonial world at bay until the late 19th century. Matthias Guenther and I have presented historical accounts by colonial observers which corroborate the Ju/'hoansi's own strongly-articulated sense of their past autonomy as hunter-gatherers, not pastoralists (Lee and Guenther 1993, 1995; Lee in press a).

The more general point here is that connectedness should be treated as a variable not a constant. Not all forms of *contact* are forms of *domination*. One must understand this clearly or lose the opportunity of making sense of cultures past, present and future. If the ethnography of the so-called "primitive" was anthropology's stock-in-trade, and the "primitive" is no longer, then let us at least preserve ethnography as a research method, redefine the concept of unit culture, and re-deploy both concept and method to new purposes.¹⁶

Can anthropology embrace the new without repudiating its past? The nature of our understandings of ethnicity and identity, the constructions of cultural meanings, and the relations of all of these to economic forces are changing in ways that we are only now beginning to comprehend. These new understandings can be found in anthropological scholarship that instead of trashing previous work is building on it, and instead of abandoning anthropology's political mandate is modifying and enlarging it.

Anthropology's Brave New World

As I have been arguing, the crisis in human history has precipitated a crisis in social anthropology; but the present conjuncture has offered not only perils and "morbid symptoms" but also challenges and opportunities. The larger part of the discipline has responded to the crisis not by closing up shop and repudiating its past, but by reinventing itself in exciting ways and enlarging its mandate in all directions.

In my teaching I like to make a distinction between classic and expanded anthropology. While textbooks still (correctly) dwell on the Nuer, Nayar, Tallensi and Murngin, since the 1960s the discipline has set new agendas, shifting its gaze from the shrinking areas of tribal life, to the cities, the clinics, the housing projects and the factories, as well as the rural villages where the vast majority of humanity now makes its life; the anthropological

gaze has even entered on occasion the board rooms of the oppressors (Nader 1972).

Anthropology has come to the metropole, invading the turf long occupied by sociology, keeping the ethnographic method and making race, class and gender its central concerns. A discipline that used to study old ethnicities and mourn their passing, is now embracing the new and chronicling the ways in which new ethnicities, new identities, and new cultures are being forged. If we are still bearing witness, it is to some of the horrors visited upon the world's peoples, but also to some of their resilience in creatively resisting and accommodating these forces, and in preserving and reconstructing their cultures (Scott 1985).

A few examples will suggest the range of current research.

Aiwa Ong (University of California, Berkeley) studied emotional disorders of women workers in a Malaysian electronics factory (1987) and found their roots in traditional Malay belief systems attempting to cope with massive change. Nancy Scheper-Hughes' studied infant and child mortality among the poorest of the poor in Brazil in her book *Death without Weeping* (1992), and in *A Bed Called Home* Mamphela Ramphele has written a powerful account of the men, women, and children in the migrant labour hostels of Cape Town (1993). These ethnographic works rank with some of the best social criticism written in the last two decades.

Another branch of expanded anthropology looks at the forms of culture in the industrial metropolis. Rayna Rapp (New School) and Faye Ginsburg (NYU) work in the growing field of "science as culture", specifically the impact on doctors, patients, and technicians of the new reproductive technologies (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995). Similar is the work of Emily Martin who studied the use of language and gender stereotyping in textbooks in obstetrics and gynaecology (Martin 1987).

Then there is the work closest to my own interests: the culture and economies of indigenous peoples and their encapsulation in industrial and post-industrial states. David Anderson of the University of Alberta studies the impact of mining and industrial pollution on Evenk reindeer herders in post-Soviet Siberia (1991). David Trigger (1992) has written on an Aboriginal community in western Queensland and included the full range of white power-holders and service providers in his field of view.

Elsewhere in the metropolis other ethnographers are studying skinheads, rock groups, gay men of colour, leather bars, fascists, greens, blue-collar workers, and even white Anglican ladies' clubs and organisations.

A number of others have tackled more traditional anthropological subject matter giving it new twists. The South African anthropologists transplanted to the U.S., John and Jean Comaroff, have made important studies of the Tswana-speaking Rolong religion, world-view and political economy without denying or ignoring their history rooted in "traditional" culture. The Comoroffs specifically distance themselves from "postmodernism" preferring to call themselves "*neomodern*" (1992).

The older anthropology and the new come together in exploring the emergence of new ethnicities. As I noted at the outset capitalist modernity has been both a world creator and a world destroyer. It certainly can be seen as a forcing ground for the genesis of new ethnicities and the regeneration of old ones. Nowhere is this truer than in the study of some of the new ethnicities brought into being by the movement of peoples and the clash of cultures. The process of "*mestisage*" is a striking phenomenon of modernity. Sidney Mintz calls the Caribbean the first truly "modern" region, an early example of the creation of a new culture by bringing together of African and European and Asian peoples on a terrain occupied by aboriginal Amerindians (Mintz and Price 1992).

Some of the best recent work on this area has been done by Gerald Sider on the Lumbee of North Carolina (1993), a people who at various times in their history have been regarded by the wider world as Amerindian, White, and Black. The complex ways in which the Lumbee have constructed and reconstructed their identities in the 20th century has resonance for aboriginal Australian and for Metis and Creole populations elsewhere who are grappling with similar problems.

From Khoi to Coloured ... and Back?

In *The Weapon of Theory* (1974) Amílcar Cabral wrote that the task before the African people was not only achieving independence but also recapturing history, a history taken from the African peoples by the colonialists. Recapturing history has become a major movement in literature, history and anthropology: the study of colonial discourse and the attempts by subaltern peoples to liberate their consciousness from it.

Post-Apartheid South Africa offers the observer striking examples of mestisage, and of the Cabralian recapturing of history. It goes without saying that the history of the so-called "non-whites" of South Africa is not a unitary one. Diverse historical streams are represented within it, but in the western part of the country, the largest stream includes those who trace their ancestry back to the Khoi herders and San foragers. Up to two million "Coloured" South Africans would identify themselves this way, with added streams of European, Malay, Asian and other African ancestries; but until recently the opportunity for these peoples to explore their roots has been compromised and distorted by centuries of racial discrimination (Marais 1957) and the heavy hand of the Apartheid system.

Previous representations of the Khoisan peoples were saturated with racist colonial discourse. The doctrine of progress ranked peoples on technical achievements and Khoi and San were often presented as exemplars of the bottom of the ladder, as the cast-offs of creation. This pernicious doctrine was used blatantly to justify oppression and dispossession (Gordon 1992; Skotnes 1996).

However from the 1970s on, South Africa witnessed a new assertion of power and consciousness on the part of the African majority through the Black Consciousness movement (Biko 1978, 1979). It is of anthropological moment and of particular interest to me to explore how people of Khoisan heritage have espoused Black Consciousness and re-identified themselves with their putative ancestors and with the millions of their countrywomen and men who were fighting oppression (Pityana et.al. 1992).

Khoi and San: A Complex History

Of course wherever we explore ethnicity and identity politics new complexities emerge. "Coloured" politics in South Africa has many diverse currents including Islamic fundamentalism, support for the now "reformed" National Party, and various left, right, and cultural nationalist tendencies. Even though a prominent coloured political figure of Trotskyist persuasion recently had his name legally changed from Benny Alexander to Khoisan X, the "Khoisan roots" question is only one of a number of difficult cross-currents affecting identity politics today.

Many aspects of the Khoisan revival raise fascinating historical issues. Let me mention a few. First is the question of the relationship between the

historic "Khoi" pastoralists and the "San" hunter-gatherers. Were they sworn enemies as several authorities claim, or were there periods and places where the relations were amicable? And will this history undergo revision for the sake of a larger unity?

And a prior question: were they even separate peoples? Were the San in the Cape merely impoverished Khoi, who had lost their cattle and sheep? And similarly could San people adopt cattle husbandry and immediately "raise" themselves up? Richard Elphick made this argument of the fluidity and interchangeability between Khoi and San in the Cape area, and it has been influential (1977). The archaeological evidence is complex, but both within and outside the Cape there were certainly many other Bushmen without a history of herding in their past (Smith 1992).

Another issue, addressed above, is whether the San outside the Cape were autonomous societies pre-colonially or were dominated for a millennium by powerful outsiders. In other words will those who are seeking to throw off the shackles of colonial ideology to find their Khoisan roots, discover only a history of more domination by different power holders stretching into the past?

Wilmsen (1989) and Wilmsen and Denbow (1990) have argued the case that the San have been dominated for centuries, first by pre-colonial Bantu-speaking chiefdoms and second by 100-300 years of European mercantile capitalism. This view also adds that the Bushmen were not even hunter-gatherers in the past, but rather pastoralists, herding for other African peoples of the Early Iron-Age.

This view has been vigorously contested. The archaeological evidence for *contact* between Iron-Age and Stone Age peoples is good, but much weaker when one tries to show *domination* of Later Stone Age by Iron Age peoples. Current research combining archaeology and oral history attests that *coexistence* might be a better word (Smith and Lee 1997, Lee in press a). Second, the revisionists tend to underestimate the sheer diversity of historical circumstances of the Khoisan peoples in the 19th century and earlier. There were wretched San peoples living in abject poverty; there were also independent cattle-holding San peoples, and a number of very successful San people who lived by the hunt and who maintained a proud independence.

E.G. Frieda-Nela Williams (1991), among others, has written of the relations between the Bushmen and the 18th and 19th century Ovambo kingdoms of northern Namibia as equitable and friendly. They traded on the basis of equality, not as masters and servants. In at least two kingdoms, traditions have it that the royal line was founded by marriages between Ovambo men and hunter-gatherer women. The German geographer Passarge wrote in detail of the "Buschmannreich" of the Ghanzi San who from the 1840s to 70s, lived exclusively by hunting and gathering, and who under their paramount leader, the mighty Dukurri, kept all comers at bay and jealously guarded their turf (1907).

In South Africa itself there is John Wright's famous study of *Bushman Raiders of the Drakensberg* (1971) showing how resilient the San people had been in the face of increasing pressure by both European and other African forces on the Natal frontier from the 1840s to 70s. And Shula Marks' classic paper "Khoisan Resistance to the Dutch" (1972) documented the military resistance by the San peoples to Boer expansion. All these studies show the resilience and pragmatism, the ability to project power and the desire to survive of the Khoisan peoples in the face of overwhelming odds. These stories could form the bases of a popular history of the Khoisan peoples.

Problems for an Expanded Anthropology

The existence of this hidden history, hitherto suppressed by colonial discourse and apartheid ideology, suggests a number of new directions for anthropologists to explore in South Africa. Elsewhere, expanded anthropology, by celebrating the birth of new ethnicities and not just mourning the passing of the old, embraces new possibilities for research on the politics of identity.

For example in North America, perhaps the most significant development of the last two decades is indigenous peoples speaking to us in their own voices. e.g. the Canadian Innu, Lubicon, Teme-Augama and others (Richardson 1989). The Gitksan and Wet'suet'en people of British Columbia are good examples of former and are continuing hunters and gatherers, indigenous peoples not unlike the San or Australian aborigines, who have addressed the larger public directly in a variety of voices including the courts (Sterritt 1989; Gisday Wa and Delgum Uukw 1989) and in the cultural

sphere (People of 'Ksan 1980). Increasingly indigenous peoples are making political alliances with environmentalists, feminists, youth groups, and peoples of colour.

Clearly the cultural renaissance underway in a number of native communities has generated considerable interest in 'traditional' ethos and world-view, governance, subsistence, arts, crafts, ethno-botany, and healing, for these and other spheres of knowledge, the elders and anthropological texts are the main sources of information.

Obviously the post-Apartheid era has ushered in a new politics of indigenism in South Africa; witness the spate of new exhibits, conferences, and grass roots mobilisation on or by peoples calling themselves Khoisan and/or Bushmen. This ferment opens up exciting possibilities for collecting the oral traditions of the old people. This constitutes the living history of a segment of the South African nation; an extremely well-established branch of research for example in Australia, but barely begun in South Africa. There is a need for scholars to walk over the land with rural elders, for studies of place names; accounts of sacred sites, battles, and other historical events need to be memorialised. Studies are needed of Khoi and San words that have remained in the language, their meanings and significance; and there is still much to be mined from existing archival sources such as the Bleek and Lloyd collection (1911; see Deacon 1997).

Conclusion

This paper has delineated the crisis of representation in anthropology and has attempted to comprehend its underlying epistemological and ideological roots. The field of anthropology has been undergoing a series of transformations and the original *raison d'être* has required reassessment. Yet despite the fundamental challenges of the 'revisionists' and postmodernists it can be argued that a core of relevance to both scholarly and political agendas remains; that anthropology as a whole is responding to this challenge is indicated by the shift away from simplistic evolutionary arguments towards more nuanced, historically sensitised, and critical understandings.

Despite the current vogue for ambiguity and hyper-relativism, I hope it will soon become apparent to even the most ardent constructivist, that evidence does count. Some form of scientific method - a means of making

sense of the world by weighing evidence - will be indispensable to the anthropology of the future. I would see science, humanism and critical reflection not as mutually antagonistic but all as integral parts of anthropological tool kit. The recent work of the Canadian philosopher of science Alison Wylie, offers an eloquent and cogent defence of "realist" epistemologies for archaeology and anthropology that is still reflexive, critical and feminist (1992a, 1992b, in press).

Recovering history is now a world-wide social movement among encapsulated peoples, not only in South Africa, Canada, and Australia, but in New Zealand, Russia, and elsewhere. And it is not just an issue for one people or one nation: cultural diversity old and new is part of the heritage of all humanity. Ultimately the composition of the discipline should reflect the cultural diversity of the world. In July 1996 the first Ju/'hoan student to study archaeology completed his first year of training at the Namibian National Museum in Windhoek.

There is one final point I would like to make that brings us back to our starting point: the value of studying unit cultures by means of a fine-grained ethnographic method. It is of critical importance that anthropology preserve the knowledge of the non-capitalist, non-bureaucratic, small-scale societies, and not allow them to be written out of humankind's past. With the collapse of "actually existing socialism" and other setbacks for the world's progressive forces, we are living in an age of sharply diminished expectations. This has been accompanied by a severe curtailment of the political imagination. Overtaken by tunnel vision, it is harder and harder in the current climate to imagine alternatives to global capitalism. The ethnographic corpus so carefully assembled therefore has a crucial role to play, not only bearing witness to the diversity and creativity of our species, but also to the fact that in the not very distant past other ways of being, other ways of living in the world, yet *outside* the "system" were and are possible.¹⁷

Notes

¹ This paper was written originally for presentation at a seminar at the University of the Western Cape, May 1995, developing ideas previously appearing in my "Art, Science or Politics: The Crisis in Hunter-gatherer Studies (1992)." Subsequently expanded versions were given at the University of Western Australia, Perth, and the Australian National University, Canberra. I wish to thank the faculty and students of these institutions for their thoughtful criticisms. In addition thanks go to Henry Bredckamp, David Bunn, Kwesi Prah, and Tony Humphreys of U.W.C. and Andrew Smith and John Sharp of the University of Cape Town. In Australia I wish to thank David Trigger, Robert Tonkinson, Sandy Toussaint, Basil Sansom, and Gareth Griffiths of U.W.A.; and Nic Peterson, David Martin, John Taylor, and Richard Davis of A.N.U. Also thanks to Joanna Casey and Bruce Berman, Canadian colleagues visiting at A.N.U. during my stay there. The financial support from the Australian National University and the University of Toronto is gratefully acknowledged.

² Of course there was a significant minority of political economists who strongly opposed these views. And conversely, there undoubtedly were anthropologists who endorsed the Imperial project without reservation.

³ That there was a "left wing" of the Imperial Project cannot be doubted. It can be traced back to the writings of Fray Barthelmy de las Casas, and appeared in southern Africa the idealism of British missionaries and civil servants from John Phillip to Moffat and Livingstone. To take just one other example, Robert Shenton of Queen's University, Canada is studying the considerable influence of the English radical Henry George on British colonial officers in the period 1900-1930 (Bruce Berman pers. comm.)

⁴ For more on Boas and his times, see Stocking ed. 1987; Baker 1996.

⁵ Julian Steward (1936, 1955) was one of the early advocates of a more consciously "scientific" approach; major spokespersons today include Marvin Harris (1979) and Lew Binford (1982).

⁶ Ruth Benedict (1934) and A. L. Kroeber (1948) were precursors of this tendency, whose recent advocates include Claude Levi-Strauss (1963) and Mary Douglas (1966). Clifford Geertz (1973) has been the most influential theorist of the current generation of humanists.

⁷ See Roseberry 1989, and Schneider and Rapp 1995. A somewhat divergent Marxist tradition that could be labelled cultural Marxism or Marxist Humanism can be traced in the works of the late Eleanor Leacock (1982) and Stanley Diamond (1974). Sidney Mintz's approach (e.g. 1985) falls somewhere in between the more humanist and the more political-economic Marxisms.

⁸ A parallel process, though not directly related to Wolf, has been the tendency to recast those non-state societies formerly regarded as egalitarian, as fundamentally hierarchical, thus throwing into question whether societies anywhere can be classified as egalitarian (e.g. Flanagan 1989; Legros 1985). But see Paynter (1989) and Price and Brown (1985) for more balanced views, and B. Trigger (1990) for a compelling empirical argument for the reality of egalitarian societies.

⁹ Key texts in the "Great Kalahari Debate" include in addition to Lee 1979 and Wilmsen 1989, Solway and Lee 1990, Wilmsen and Denbow 1990, Lee and Guenther 1991, 1993, 1995. See also Barnard's annotated bibliography of the debate (1992).

¹⁰ For a late conversion to relativism see Leach 1989; on the fallacy of "hyper-relativism" see Bruce Trigger 1989.

¹¹ It must be acknowledged that Anthropological postmodernism claims its affinities to the left rather than the right (Marcus and Fischer 1986, Clifford 1983, Clifford and Marcus 1986) but this political positioning has been contested (see Mascia-Lees et. al. 1989; Polier and Roseberry 1993).

¹² E. Wilmsen, for example, uses the Hobsbawm and Ranger thesis to the same effect in a section of his book entitled "*The Invention of 'Bushmen'*" (1989:24-26). The frequent and facile use of the invention trope in contemporary scholarship raises disturbing ontological questions which are rarely addressed.

¹³ Parker in turn (1995) has offered an interesting critique of Obeyesekere's book and the latter has replied (1995). And Sahlins has written his own book-length reply (1995).

¹⁴ see also Spivak 1988. Another point worth noting by Mascia-Lees et al. is that much of the critical reflexive methodology proclaimed by postmodernists had been in use within feminist anthropologies for over a decade, but had been largely ignored. See Haraway 1989; Di Leonardo 1991; Gero and Conkey 1991.

¹⁵ The feeling of omniscience and instant global communication is nowhere more clearly expressed than in the television coverage of events like the Gulf War or

the Oklahoma City bombing where major developments are flashed around the world as they occur. But this is a very recent phenomenon.

¹⁶ The term "primitive" of course has been highly problematic. My usage here follows that of Stanley Diamond who in his book "In Search of the Primitive" (1974) argued against the term's pejorative meanings. He saw the term as a key part of anthropology's political agenda, its critique of "civilisation", in the broader sense of "primitive" as basic, original, and fundamental.

¹⁷ To return to a theme presented earlier; I wonder how much of the malaise in anthropology can be traced to the perceived failure of Marxism to deliver the goods. But it is worth adding that the world may look very different from South African vantage point where empowerment and engagement is expanding rather than contracting. The work of scholar activists at places like the Mayibuye Center at the University of the Western Cape shows us that good theory can only come out of good practice: the importance for scholars engage in praxis, to be part of a political program for progressive social change.

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