

GUEST EDITORIAL

Anthropology and the Time Factor

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Sometimes when one first goes to a place or meets a person, one has an immediate sense of recognition: everything learned after that simply serves to put the first impression into context. At other times, the initial encounter is so misleading one completely changes one's ideas. In either case, the passage of time affects the way the final picture is composed. Becoming familiar with a place or acquainted with a person is not only a question of one's reactions—it also involves interaction over a duration. This is how human beings build up knowledge of themselves and their environment, and, as a human science, this is what anthropology is about.

By interaction I do not only mean the exchange of words—or blows, for that matter—with another on a one-to-one basis; I refer to any kind of situation where information received feeds into what is already known. One does this constantly, often without thinking about it. A town is not just the streets and houses that strike the eye; you draw on previous knowledge to make a guess at the amenities it has. In the case of persons you meet, a double interaction is likely to take place. People do not just offer information in themselves; they will probably actively supply information, and in turn adjust what they are supplying in their own interests of getting to know you.

It is also possible to think of “interaction” in relation to those one never meets, whom one sees from afar or just hears talked about. Each bit of information interacts with information one already has. An English person may never have met a New Guinea highlander, but from what he or she knows about non-Western societies will already have some image of what the name conjures up. There is both a negative and positive side to this. When that image reinforces general views that have nothing to do with Papua New Guinea itself, we may call it prejudicial. Here the anthropologist's job is to provide a more informed view. Yet the preexisting image may not be negative in the prejudiced sense; it may simply be the best one can do from the perspective of one's own culture. Anthropologists call such an image ethnocentric.

Anthropologists may also point out that we cannot escape from ethnocentrism. Nor necessarily should we want to. For anthropology can go further than recognizing ethnocentrism; it can deliberately use preexisting cultural knowledge in a positive way. It does so by making the process of gaining knowledge a conscious and explicit one. Rather than just trying to hand out information, it actively encourages people to think about where they come from themselves, what values they hold, and thus what they already know—in order to make new knowledge for themselves.

This kind of interaction, between what people already know and what they will come to know, constitutes more than “reflection,” though reflection is an important part of it. It is a process intrinsic to the faculty for knowledge itself: putting things in sequence, recalling and looking ahead, making patterns, creating concepts. And time is built into the process.

The time involved may be a matter of hours or of years. It may be a question of reading an ethnography about an unfamiliar people or writing a paper about everyday events from a particular perspective, or it may be a matter of living for eighteen months in a distant location or spending years developing a theory from the writings of other scholars. Students and teachers are on the same side of the line here. At whatever stage he or she is at, the anthropologist needs time for interaction to take effect.

This is true of any learning process. In the case of anthropology, the time factor itself is something about which we have to be conscious. Anthropologists collect information about the lives and values of peoples from all over the world, their cultures and artifacts, the way they organize themselves. As information, such data may well seem bizarre or pointless—rather like photographs of places or persons one is never likely to see. But that is the kind of information the anthropologist turns into knowledge. It becomes knowledge when it enlarges our perceptions of the world, extends the thoughts we already have, enables us to reach a new perspective on the familiar or discover fresh possibilities in human behavior.

That this process takes time is obvious in the case of fieldwork. Fieldworkers use their own cultural repertoire to access what they are learning about another culture. But they do not instantly know what is going to be useful. If I walk toward someone aware of greeting behavior, perhaps already sensitive to the local courtesies, I am attuned to the range of reactions I can expect. Those expectations may well make me puzzle over what actually happens, but if they were not there I could not even begin to be puzzled! Yet I might also be drawing the wrong parallel—and need other kinds of information to tell me when a greeting is or is not appropriate. Over and again, anthropologists thus use their own cultural skills to place themselves in positions from which they can elicit information. The anthropologist also has to be conscious that it cannot be done all at once: one has to live through various positions, whether one is present in person or in imagination, in order to build up an overall picture. Only then will any further piece of information extend one’s understanding.

Since we are studying what is also true about ourselves—the nature of human sociality and the difference that culture makes—we study through ourselves. And however abstract our explanations and theories become, they reflect the complex patterns of thought and behavior found in all human interactions. This means that one is aware of one’s own language and thus of one’s own values and practices all the time. In the same way, the student reading an ethnography is aware of that work as the outcome of the investigations of a particular fieldworker, on whom he or she can build up a cultural if not a personal profile.

That process of being aware turns information into knowledge. Rather like getting to know the layout of a town or what kind of person a friend turns out to be, it needs enough time for a kind of interaction to have taken place. Whether the effect feels like a laborious attempt to grasp an idea or like a sudden flash of insight, only you can make knowledge for yourself. Someone else

cannot do it for you. The position you are already in, the thoughts you already have, are extended. There are many ways of accomplishing such extensions from within our own culture. Anthropology is unique in that it not only seeks out the positions and perspectives of other cultures, it also develops theories about how that process of “having a position” itself works. In what way does a person’s life make sense to that person? How consciously do we subscribe to ideologies? How is it that similar social patterns form and reform themselves in different situations? Anthropologists are as interested in the way human beings acquire information about one another as they are in what human beings turn that information into.

Let me end with a negative. Like any enthusiast for his or her subject, anthropologists will tell you anthropology is many things—and so it is, for it extends us in innumerable ways. But there is one thing it is not: it is not instant knowledge.

Western culture invests heavily in information techniques, in the storage and retrieval of data, in relaying images in no time at all across vast spaces. Sometimes one gets the impression that since technology can take care of the storage, all one needs to know is how to call the right image up at the right time, since we shall recognize at once what it is we “see.” Yet when it comes to the study of human society and culture itself, including the people that make these things, time must be built into the way we process the information. For whatever the scale—hours or years—interaction implies a duration. Without the time factor, we would lose that sense of ourselves that gives us a context for our ideas and that sense of others that comes on us freshly each time.