

## **GUEST EDITORIAL**

### **For an Uncertain Anthropology**

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Back in the 1940s—so the story goes—cultural anthropologist Ralph Linton examined Ph.D. students by twirling a globe, stopping the whirling world with an emphatic forefinger, and asking the young scholar before him to describe in detail the cultures of the peoples who inhabit that sector. Whether this is an apocryphal tale or not, it highlighted a serene confidence that the world of humankind could be known in its entirety if only one worked diligently enough at this. The anthropology that envisioned this knowable world was thought of as a holistic discipline—“A Mirror for Man,” as the title of a popular introductory textbook of the period put it. Because this mirror image encompassed a global knowledge of other peoples, it was believed that the anthropologist could master, with equal comprehension, such diverse objects as winnowing baskets and religious rites, architectural styles and economic transactions. Regardless of the tribulations involved in learning firsthand about other peoples, this anthropology of the social world was above all a certain one—certain that the progressive accumulation of knowledge should be equated with progress and ultimately with the betterment of humankind. This was a positivist vision, well adapted to industrial nation-states that were still in the throes of maximizing economic and political gains.

Especially during the past two decades, the mirror has shattered, its shards reflecting the multitude of specialized parts that social and cultural anthropology have become. Today’s anthropologies are the products of an exponential growth and bureaucratization of information. In other words, these numerous anthropologies, whose emergence represents the interests and needs of their practitioners, have become formalized in part through the founding of professional societies and the publication of specialty journals. Increasingly, these specialist designations are self-referential—anthropologists use them to categorize their professional identities and to market their scholarly skills. Today we are anthropologists of the economic, political, urban, ecological, symbolic, religious, historical, humanistic, medical, playful, visual, applied, and other specializations.

Burdened and imbalanced by specialized knowledge, anthropology has plummeted from the visionary grace of humanity’s interpreter and been pinned to earth beneath the weight of human complexities and entangled in their intricacies. Nonetheless, the mirror’s shards have not only retained but also have clarified and strengthened their senses of certainty. The compartmentalizations of the discipline have produced specialists, and vice versa, and specialists are experts in the creation of certainty about the validity of the knowledge they are expert in. The creation of certainty reifies the phenomena of the social world. Boundaries between compartments of knowledge become more rigid as many and more ways of classifying information are produced. Certainty about the classification of knowledge generates the

justification and the organization for its own continued existence and expansion. The categories themselves, of specialization, become their own rationale—rather than aids for illuminating the knowledge they purport to represent.

The earlier holism of the anthropological vision has been succeeded by the holism of each of its many parts. One sort of positivism has replaced another. In the name of their own progress, specialities are turning themselves into microcosms of the human condition, claiming to speak in its name but thereby distorting and falsifying the very humanity they are appropriating. An assumption of certainty of knowledge about others breeds contempt for them; if they can be known fully, then they lose their autonomy, becoming objects to be manipulated by specialists who lay claim to such certainty.

Specialist knowledge in scholarship is essential if anthropology is to sustain itself as a discipline, but if it is not to ossify in its bureaucratization, a different kind of anthropology also is needed—an uncertain anthropology that inserts question marks into the boundaries that classify specialities, and an anthropology that shows these to be human constructs and scholarly fictions that have value only if they can be collapsed as well as reified. Yet this is not just a matter of softening these boundaries or, in Clifford Geertz's terms, of blurring genres to enable the perspectives of other disciplines to influence our anthropologies. Too often this results in the importation of readymade paradigms and their expert wholesalers, who are only too ready to colonize a neighborly market. In recent years we have witnessed this, for example, in the importation of theories of formalist economics, of varieties of Marxism, and of literary criticism.

We do not need borrowed or “new” paradigms into which we can slot ourselves. What we do need are eclectic anthropologists who neither respect boundaries of specialization nor feel obliged to carry a general vision of the mission of anthropology—eclectic anthropologists who will inject uncertainty into the reifications of our anthropologies, “scientific” and “humanistic” alike. Part gadfly, part clown, these uncertain anthropologists should set about undermining the certainty with which experts pursue specialized knowledge. Let me put it this way: As a student of uncertainty, the eclectic anthropologist recognizes that the phenomena of the social world are too complex to be grasped fully and therefore continually resist comprehension. It is our appreciation of this resistance that drives us to create ways of grappling with these phenomena. In these attempts we must fail, time and again. But these failures often are creative ones, failures that offer a better chance of adding to the appreciation of the social world, either by transcending the received wisdoms of specialties or by circumventing them. The uncertainties of eclecticism complement the certainties of specialization.

Let me leave you with one type of issue that an uncertain anthropology would bring to the fore. The most valuable kind of explanation is not necessarily the most complete, the neatest, or the most defensible. It is an explanation that breaks down when it is pushed to the limits of its explanatory power, thereby demonstrating instructively what it can explain and what it cannot. But how many of us have tried to publish a paper that destroys itself? And would there be a scholarly journal prepared to publish such a work?