The nature of a cosmopolitan anthropology and the nature of human difference

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Abstract: Thomas Hylland Eriksen argues in his incisive and fair-minded comment on "what is European about European anthropology" by advocating its cosmopolitanism. Anthropology that is cosmopolitan might go beyond hierarchies of language, country and institution, he urges; might provide the friction between different traditions that sparks a global intellectual exchange; and might bring global insights to bear, comparatively, on local issues of political economy. In this way Eriksen makes interesting links between "European anthropology" as an idea or concept and "European anthropology" as a set of ethnographic studies: I read him as saying that by virtue of the empirical facts that anthropological research in European settings has unearthed, we can now imagine a way of practising anthropology that is "cosmopolitan" – as amplified above. I would invest equally in a cosmopolitan anthropology, and would like to explore further what in the nature of cosmopolitanism as a concept enables it to have its intellectual and its moral power.

Cosmopolitan anthropology has a mission. It is encapsulated in this asseveration from Michael Jackson:

> One would have hoped that by now we would have broken the habit of magnifying those traits which seem to make us ostensibly unlike others – the color of our skin, the language we speak, the food we eat, the beliefs we espouse – and come to terms with what all human beings have in common, for better or for worse, and seeing, beneath the surface of cultural differences, comparable imperatives, logics, and dispositions (2004: 153).

And in this from Ernest Gellner:

> We are all human and should treat each other decently and with respect. Don't take more specific classifications seriously. Is categorization between consenting adults to be allowed to all? (1993: 3).

Allowing for the characteristic differences in individual style and tone, Gellner and Jackson make common cause. Anthropology, they say, is the elucidation of that commonality shared by all human beings as members of the same species. Skin colour, language, dietary habits, cosmologies – these are matters of *cultural surfaces*. But beneath these surfaces, animating these surface manifestations of cultural difference, will be commensurate human logics, imperatives and dispositions. Classifications more specific than the human species – nationalities, religions, classes, professions, statuses, races, even genders – should not be mistaken as having the same ontological status as that species sameness. The *symbolic* differences that cultures make between and among human beings – as "pious", "modest", "feminine", "alien", "autochthonous", "traditional", and so on – are not be taken as possessing the same truth, or as bearing the same moral weight, as *ontological* truths of human nature that anthropology discerns. Symbolic truths are constructed truths, truths that depend on human recognition and maintenance; ontological truths describe the nature of a reality that is independent of our assertions, a reality that goes on being real whether or not we recognise it as such. Our human species-commonality, and the individuality by which human embodiment expresses itself, are truths of this latter order.

Gellner and Jackson are equally assertive in terms of the moral consequences of anthropological knowledge: this is not something of merely academic interest but should impact upon the habits and procedures by which we conduct ourselves in everyday social life. A certain ethos of decency and respect, of "cosmopolitan politesse", should follow from anthropological insights, a certain level of human interaction that all in

possession of a mature competency ("consenting adults") should espouse. We do not enslave, we abide by a rule of law, we treat the Other as an end in themselves (not a means) – and we do not *seriously* believe in the symbolic classifications that our different cultures have traditionally suggested for us. We might enjoy these cultures and classes at one level, as aesthetic preferences – one prefers, say, Arsenal to Tottenham Hotspur, Judaism to Islam, lager to ale, jeans to suits – but we are sufficiently mature, humane, to take an *ironic* stance towards these aesthetic preferences also (Rapport and Stade 2014). That is, we recognise that cultural symbologies do not necessarily describe or respond to the ontological truths of the human condition. They are language-games and they are not fit necessarily to guide practice or morality in the serious business of human interaction (whether the micro-socialities of interaction between neighbouring individuals, or the macro-socialities of interaction between global populations) (Rapport 2010).

What is the context of the asservations from Jackson and Gellner? It is twofold. First is a longstanding historical debate – as old as the discipline of anthropology itself – on the foundational nature of human difference. When Immanuel Kant first used the word "anthropology" to outline the possibility and the propriety for an enlightenment science, he envisaged the focus as being on the nature of humankind as such: on human being beyond and beneath the merely conventional and contingent ascriptions of an *ancien regime* that had insisted on differences of wealth, status, nationality, religion, race and gender being deemed actual differences in biological make-up and moral worth. But then Kant's student, Johan Herder, repudiated the claim that there was such a thing as humanity, as against there being Germans and French (and so on): humans ensconced in natural communities of language and custom and *Volk*. Was it not pathological to imagine a deracinated human being outside the context of a land, a race and a soil? The history of anthropology as a discipline, according to George Stocking (1992: 347), may thus be viewed "as a continuing (and complex) dialectic between the universalism of "*anthropos*" and the diversitarianism of "*ethnos*": it is anthropology's "recurrent dilemma". In Clifford Geertz's (1973: 22) phrasing, how ought the discipline to square a generic human rationality and the biological unity of mankind with the great variation of cultural forms? Are we human over and against our cultural differences – by virtue of our universal capacity to create and recreate culture – or is it by way of distinct enculturation that we come to embody a specific variant of human-ness? A cosmopolitan anthropology, as I would know it, is firmly of the opinion that a common humanity is ontological while cultural diversitarianism is symbolical, political and aesthetic. The latter symbolizations do not speak to the foundations, the fundamental realities,

of a human condition; they speak rather to political investments in discourses of sameness and difference, of tradition and convention, and hierarchy and regimentation, investments which will simply serve the furtherance of certain interests or tastes.

A further context for the asservations of Jackson and Gellner is a contemporary popular "culturalism" and politics of identity. Paradoxically, this is a revisiting of that *ancien regime* which assigned individuals to membership of certain communities, traditions and statuses on the basis of their "heritage". The politics of identity peddles an essentialistic and ascriptive version of cultural belonging, of cultural boundaries and traditions, that is as pernicious as it is erroneous. "Cultures are not options", proclaims Bhikhu Parekh (1998: 212). Cultural differences are equivalent to species differences, asserts James Tully (1995). Again, a cosmopolitan anthropology firmly states that cultures *are* options in any moral society, and that cultural differences are of an absolutely different quality to species differences: they pertain to a discursive surface only (Rapport 2011).

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The proximate context for *my* outlining a version of a "cosmopolitan" anthropology, of course, and for drawing on Jackson and Gellner in the process, is the debate that this volume highlights on what might be the meaning of the notion of "Europe" in such appellations as "The European Association of Social Anthropologists". (Currently I happen to be Chair of the Association of the Social Anthropologists of the United Kingdom and Commonwealth (ASA), for whose membership the valence of "United Kingdom" and "Commonwealth" are no less of an issue.) This is how Francisco Martínez has described the issue in his editorial introduction: To ascertain the self-understanding of contemporary anthropologists working in different European countries in regard to the notion of "Europe". Are there particular empirical subjects that an "anthropology of Europe" would illuminate? Is there a *European* way of practising anthropology as opposed to different *national* ways? Is there a *global* way, or rather multiple *local* ways or *transnational* ways? The answer would appear to be that the contributors to this collection offer case studies that exemplify an emergent "European anthropology" possessed of a transnational character. Instead of there being a dynamics of centre-and-periphery — whether a "Western-canonical" positionality on "Europe", or a positionality that reflected different national-traditional versions of anthropological practice and expertise – what we instead find today are anthropologists across the continent of Europe participating in a "transnational dynamics of anthropological

knowledge-production". This can also seem to accord with the conclusion of Thomas Hylland Eriksen's comment where he welcomes anthropology in Europe for its "cosmopolitan Eurocentrism" (Alessandro Testa): a cosmopolitan anthropology that affirms the possibility of mutual understanding between members of a disciplinary conversation while shying away from positing any necessary or ultimate *convergence*, *consensus* or *uniformity*.

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But in missionising for a cosmopolitan anthropology, I think I would want to go further. In the name of human freedom: of emancipation from nescience and from merely *conventional* cultural ascriptions of human reality (Rapport 2012b). And this is also to take a lead from the editorial introduction by Francisco Martínez.

Martínez suggests this issue be seen as a mission statement of "an emerging transnational field" of anthropology, a "field of practice" that privileges an *auto-ethnographic* appreciation of its "epistemic and political location". "European anthropology" represents "specific kinds of relation between localities and practitioners", but also a discipline that might "exceed its conditions of possibility". I am not sure that "field" is the most apposite word, with its implication of boundary and closure, but I like the emphasis on auto-ethnography and the "excessive" knowledge to which it gives rise (cf. Rapport 2014). Ethnography is a methodology that is unifying, universalizing and convergent, I would suggest, and *cosmopolitan*. Any human being can potentially practise ethnography on any other, can know them as an ethnographic subject. Ethnography is universally applicable because both the practitioners of that methodology and the subjects of that methodology share a common nature: they are human beings.

Moreover, ethnography *is* universally applied, I would argue. The anthropological methodology is an exaggeration of an everyday, auto-ethnographic practice: human beings everywhere making "ironic" assessments of who their consociates might be, what they might mean and want, and, given those assessments, how they themselves should act for the furtherance of their own desires. Is "anthropology at home" of only limited provenance and relevance, Marilyn Strathern once famously asked: a discipline "carried out in the social context which produced it", as *faux* knowledge (1987:17)? Ironic practice would suggest that "techniques of self-knowledge" constitute a universal class of phenomena: all social actors are ethnographers (whether or not they may be social theorists; Giddens 1984: 335). In the words of Victor Turner:

> There were never any innocent, unconscious savages, living in a time of unreflective and instinctive harmony. We human beings are all and always sophisticated, conscious, capable of laughter at our own institutions (cited in Ashley 1990: xix).

Significantly, ethnography also illuminates the difference between sociocultural realities and ontological ones. While some "conditions of possibility" (Martínez) pertain to particular social and cultural milieux – "What is it possible for a "woman" or a "refugee" to know at this time or place?" – other conditions are ontological: it will never be possible for a human being to know the consciousness of their consociates or their research subjects. A cosmopolitan anthropology has, for me, the ultimate project of *knowing and acting upon* the absolute distinction between those conditions of knowledge and facts that pertain to "Europe" as a time and place, and those that pertain to the nature of human ontology. In other words, a cosmopolitan anthropology compares how it is to exist as a human being and individual in Europe with elsewhere. More than this, it would – after Kant's originary vision – seek to marry such knowledge to a morality. Given the nature of humankind – its universal capacities for pleasure and pain, for gratification and suffering, for creativity and individuality – how are those ontological conditions reflected in the social and cultural conditions in Europe and elsewhere? Ethnography as the practice of a cosmopolitan anthropology has as its ultimate end the establishment of optimal social and cultural conditions for individual fulfilment: for the individual substantiation of his or her universal human capacities, both in Europe and elsewhere. This is the individual's human birthright (Rapport 2012a).

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Our specificities – as anthropologists in or of "Europe" – sit within, are contained by, our underlying and overarching uniformities as human beings who research human being. A cosmopolitan anthropology traverses this arc between the universal and the specific in such a way that epistemologically, and hopefully morally, the latter can be made to accord with the former.

In supporting Thomas Hylland Eriksen's assertion that a "European anthropology is cosmopolitan or it is nothing", I would read into the phrasing the understanding of "cosmopolitan" outlined above. European anthropology must be "cosmopolitan" in refusing to conflate the ontological realities of our humanity, and the individuality with which that humanity is universally embodied, on the one hand, and the symbolic realities of social and cultural difference on the other. How do we, as individuals and as collections of individuals, construe "Europe" and "European", in what

contexts, to what ends, and with what consequences? A word, a concept, cannot of itself cause anything to be – "Theory is all well and fine", Jean-Martin Charcot observed, "but it does not stop things from existing" (cited in Freud 1989) – only human actors have this kind of agency, but how has that individual human agency been put into effect *by recourse to* the term "Europe"?

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