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“Friday the 13th” thinkable. We can ask not just “Where is anthropology going,” but “What is anthropology’s coincidence?”

## HAVING AN IDEA IN ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY

*João Biehl*

In the last decade, we have seen a number of proposals for doing anthropology in the contemporary world, given prevailing politics of knowledge production and the division of labor in the academy. Clifford Geertz (2000) spoke of a “world in pieces” in which older notions of the subject who is cultural “all the way down” seemed inadequate. Medical and phenomenological anthropologists have, using varying methodologies, shown how medico-scientific formations, political economy, and social networks are mediated by the body and people’s sense of psychological interiority (see Das 2007; Good, Fischer, Willen & DelVecchio Good 2010). Didier Fassin (2007, 2010) uses anthropology to build a critique of the values, discourses, and exclusions underpinning contemporary “moral economies,” from humanitarianism to HIV/AIDS in South Africa. Paul Rabinow (2008) uses the anthropology of new rationalities in the life sciences to usurp philosophy’s hegemony in concept-work. Anna Tsing, in *Friction* (2004), crafts a voice that is at once anthropological and politically invested in the ways universals are crafted and deployed on the ground. And Paul Farmer (2003, 2008) uses ethnography both to debunk medical and economic orthodoxies in health policy and to mobilize for innovative interventions.

Yet as anthropologists have tackled ever more heterogeneous subjects and deployed our tools towards global political economies, some in the discipline have worried that we find ourselves without a guiding theoretical paradigm to both understand our ethnography and motivate future work (Marcus 2008). “Brilliance is great,” says George Marcus, “but sustaining a sense of, and conditions for, standard work is better – a more pressing challenge” (in Rabinow & Marcus 2008:84). Certainly to carry out our analyses, we need models, types, theories – abstractions of various kinds. But the kinds of paradigms we search for, the ways in which we assemble them, and the authority we ascribe to them also make a great deal of difference. What if we broadened our sense of what counts as critical innovation and left aside, even if for a moment, the need for central discursive engines – the *modus operandi* that shaped much of anthropology in the twentieth century?

I find Gilles Deleuze’s essay “Having an Idea in Cinema” (1998) quite helpful as I try to address some of the major epistemological worries circulating among us today: anxieties about how to combine fieldwork and conceptual work and about the lack of a “driving new idea” in anthropology. In what follows I explore the unique ways in which ethnography might generate alternative figures of thought. Epistemological

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breakthroughs do not belong only to experts and analysts.

So, what does “having an idea in anthropology” entail?

One does not have an idea in general, Deleuze argues. “Ideas must be treated as potential that are already engaged in this or that mode of expression and inseparable from it” (2008:14). Thus, according to Deleuze, philosophers try (trying is a crucial tentative verb here) to invent concepts, people in cinema invent “blocks of movement/duration” and scientists “invent and create functions” (15).

Thus, given that we work with people and are concerned with knowledge of the human, it would seem to me that our ideas should come out of that engagement.

“No one needs philosophy for reflecting,” Deleuze states (14).

So, do we need philosophy to reflect on our fieldwork?

If our business is not to do what philosophy does – “creating or even inventing concepts” (15) – what is it that we do, create or invent and how do we use philosophy to do what we do?

According to Deleuze, creation comes out of necessity.

What is it that we anthropologists need to do?

What is the complex thing that necessitates our work?

Or, are we the vectors of lost time, a narcissistic self-fulfillment, a whole that could keep the pieces from escaping or hitting us?

Deleuze adds that “Everything has a story” (15). Philosophers tell stories with concepts. Cinema tells stories with blocks of movements/duration. If anthropology also tells stories: with what? What are the materials of our story telling?

I would say that ethnographic details can reveal nuanced fabrics of singularities and the worldliness, rather than exceptionality, of people’s travails; they can make explicit the concreteness of processes and people’s buried anticipations (Biehl 2005).

So, whose stories do we tell? To whom? Is there a pre-defined public? Or, is ours a practice that begs for the emergence of a third, a reader, a community of sorts, a distinct public that is neither the character nor the writer?

What does anthropology’s storytelling with ethnographic materials invent?

Inventing something is a very solitary act – Deleuze does not believe in giving voice; in creating we are thrown back to ourselves. “But it is in the name of my creation that I have something to say to someone” (1998:16).

Consider the following statement: “If all the disciplines communicate together, it is *on the level of that which never emerges for itself*, but which is, as it were, *engaged* in every creative discipline, and this is the constitution of space-times” (16).

What we engage with will never emerge for itself. Our creative work, the necessity we address, the mode of expression we are familiar with – speaks to this real, reducible neither to time nor to space (nor the Unconscious or History, the Social or the Scientific Function). “Deserted ground is the only thing that can be seen, but this deserted ground is heavy with what lies beneath” (16-17).

Like a poet, Deleuze speaks of things that are irreducible to any form of communication, bringing a word of caution to our own ideological and humanitarian impulses to communicate the “true” truth of the human condition. Such impulses issue order-

words and ultimately partake in systems of control.

But is Deleuze saying that we should be mute? Not engage, not represent, not speak?

No, for Deleuze we are not just left to an endless self-reflexive and paralyzing mode of inquiry.

“Our creative work should stand in contrast to the controlled system of order-words that are used in a given society” (18).

Deleuze then goes on to sketch his now famous if quite cursory take on post-disciplinary societies and our supposed future in control societies – he uses the image of highways: driving freely without being at all confined yet still perfectly controlled.

Whether this “model” is true or false is beside the point here. Critical for anthropology today, I believe, is Deleuze’s alertness to the workings of the market and the plasticity of power as well as his acknowledgement of the existence of counter-information – call it ill-formed or incomplete local knowledge that comes with being governed in this or that way. Within it lies the human desire that potentially can turn counter-information into an act of resistance, of making things otherwise.

“Only the act of resistance resists death, whether the act is in the form of a work of art or in the form of a human struggle” (19).

Resisting death in all possible forms: historical oblivion, social abjection, biological life. And the act of resistance has two sides: it is human and it is also the act of art.

Our curiosity can meet what remains to be known as we bring back the everyday travails and stories of characters that might otherwise remain forgotten, with attention to the ways their own struggles and visions of themselves create holes in dominant theories and interventions. Perhaps the creativity of ethnography arises from this effort to give form to people’s own painstaking arts of living and the unexpected potentials they create, and from the descriptive work of giving these observed tensions an equally powerful force in our own accounting.

Simply engaging with the complexity of people’s lives and desires – their constraints, technologies, subjectivities, projects – in multi-layered and ever-shifting social worlds constantly necessitates the rethinking of our conceptual compasses. What would it mean for our research methodologies and ways of writing to consistently embrace this unfinishedness, seeking ways to analyze the general, the structural, and the processual while maintaining an acute awareness of the inevitable incompleteness of our accounts?

The point here is not move our interlocutors in the field up to *our* level in the hierarchy of epistemological authority so to speak – but to dislodge the hierarchy altogether, to argue for an equality of intelligences and to find novel public and scholarly ways to harness the creative conceptual work activated in the field. There is no universal formula for relevance, and ethnographic work should not be valued solely for its immediate instrumentality. The insights anthropologists produce are often, nonetheless, urgent; thus, we must continue to challenge orthodoxies of all kinds and seek original ways to communicate the categories that are significant in human experience – which the powers-that-be dismiss as “anecdotal,” nongeneralizable, and inherently impractical – to the worlds of science, policy, jurisprudence, and care. If this engagement leads

to the subtraction of theories, so much the better, in my view.

Continually adjusting itself to the reality of contemporary lives and worlds, the anthropological venture has the potential of art: to invoke neglected human potentials and to expand the limits of understanding and imagination – a people yet to come. “There is no work of art that does not call on a people who does not yet exist,” writes Deleuze at the end of “Having an Idea in Cinema” (19). The anthropological imagination also includes the active participation of readers. At stake is our capacity to generate a “we,” an engaged audience and political community that has not previously existed – our craft’s potential to become a mobilizing force in this world.

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## WHERE IS ANTHROPOLOGY GOING?

*Webb Keane*

I am a poor prophet and offer no predictions, only aspirations.

When you're in truly interdisciplinary conversations, your interlocutors usually want to know what the anthropologist can do that they can't do better on their own; what makes us worth having at the table. For socio-cultural anthropologists, one conventional answer is "ethnography." But our tic of starting every article by announcing we will "complicate the story" is growing stale, and cautious particularism ultimately narrows our vision. And if our anxieties about relevance let prevailing public opinion determine for us the defining terms of importance, we succumb to a kind of ethnocentrism, and risk over-estimating the uniqueness of our own historical moment. Doing so, we give up on one of anthropology's enduring strengths, a deep capacity for decentering and reframing the apparent priorities of the moment. So then what?

We must restore our self-confidence to think theoretically. This shouldn't stop at quoting translated fragments from European savants. If indeed those are the conversations that draw us, we should enter them able to hold our own. This means developing strong, sharp concepts from our own historical and ethnographic resources – critically reflected on. One result should be a renewed self-consciousness about comparison. This isn't a reactionary call for a return to the colonial or positivist typologies we worked so hard to dismantle. It's an insistence that we become more self-conscious about what, tacitly, *we're already doing*. Like an unstated theory, implicit comparison puts us unwittingly

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