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In Focus: Ethnographic Emergences

Introduction to "Ethnographic Emergences"

ABSTRACT This introduction situates the articles in this "In Focus" in terms of the history of anthropological theory. I argue that the objects under ethnographic scrutiny here compel a rethinking of ethnography as a method and a retooling of the theoretical apparatus of the discipline. Such fields as medicine, science, media, law, and environment pose challenges to modernist analytical toolkits because they are always already complex hybrids of nature and culture. They do not stay put inside their own analytical frames. They are also autodocumentary and make use of the shift in perspective between general and particular to generate knowledge—much as anthropology does. This introduction is an argument for an anthropology of emergence that is not content to settle for mere descriptive adequacy but that uses its objects to unsettle anthropological claims to knowledge. [Keywords: anthropological theory, ethnography, science]

IF THE WATCHWORD OF A CERTAIN strand in social and cultural anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s was *change*, the key term of the articles collected here is *emergence*. Michael M. J. Fisher's commentary on this "In Focus" collection spells out in some detail the importance of the focus on emergent practices and phenomena in these articles for the discipline at large. The purpose of this introduction is briefly to situate the articles in relation to the history of anthropological theory. These articles demonstrate that the anthropology of science, originally conceived in relation to the sociology of scientific knowledge and social studies of science more broadly, can be repatriated to the center of anthropology, with profound implications for how we conceptualize our research and how we do our work in the various fields that constitute our professional activity.

Twenty years ago, George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986) identified two trends in anthropological writing at the time: One involved political economy, influenced by world systems theory, various strands of Marxism, and dependency theory; the other concerned a focus on cultural experience, interpretation, and the person, influenced by structuralism and symbolic anthropology. These two trends were broad reactions against mid-century functionalisms and systems theories, which relied on equilibrium models to account for social and cultural change (Roy Rappaport and Edmund Leach come to mind). Equilibrium, offered as a cautionary note to rampant destructive colonial and capitalist intervention in small-scale societies, still seemed an inadequate response to a rapidly changing world and to the wrenching shifts in production and politics that had

been taking place in many of the traditional sites of anthropological research. As Marxist-derived stage theories fell into disfavor, the debates between multilineal and unilineal evolutionists were supplanted by adaptationist approaches (see Ortner 1984:132), which purported to offer observable, measurable variables as well as a handle on social and cultural transformation. World systems theory, modernization theories, structural Marxism, and person-centered interpretative approaches offered analytical tools that did not so readily fall into the traps of evolutionary or ecological determinism (or so it was thought). Structuralism, hermeneutics, and structural Marxism offered an account of the meaningful worlds within which social action took place with a rigor lacking in the quarters of U.S. anthropology that remained wedded to culture and personality or Robert Lowie's "shreds and patches." And, as Sherry Ortner argued in her influential review article on trends in anthropological theory since the 1960s, new forms of practice theory via Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, and others offered an account of the mutually determining yet durably structured influences of action and system that obviated the stale debates of materialist approaches, symbolic anthropology, and structuralism over causality and ever deeper (but rarely empirically observable) structures (see Ortner 1984).

A thumbnail sketch of twenty-odd years of anthropological theory cannot do justice to the transformation the discipline underwent as its subjects' entanglements in large-scale processes became more and more apparent. I offer it here only to flag the persistent problem of change for a discipline perennially trying to escape its static understandings

of culture and society. Contemporary movements in theory have been working in the tracks of the broad trends identified by Ortner, and Marcus and Fischer 20 years ago. Studies of social and cultural change went hand in glove with renewed attention to colonialism and history and inspired anthropologists to attend to their subjects' resistance and agency. Resistance and agency, in turn, fed theoretical developments that emphasized the person and subject formation.

Yet many anthropologists were, and remain, dissatisfied. The tools at their disposal could not get a grip on the new kinds of ethnographic subjects to which anthropologists increasingly turned their attention—science, medicine, law, media, and the environment, to name a few represented in the articles that follow. In addition, persistent criticisms from within and outside the discipline blunted the analytical sharpness of some of these tools. A focus on agency and resistance was susceptible to charges of voluntarism: It seemed as if anthropologists discovered the subject of liberal legalism wherever they looked. Structuration and practice approaches turned into theories of entrenchment. Reflexivity became alternately denunciatory and narcissistic. Theories of change relied on teleological progression and, in spite of themselves, on notions of “stable states” and “endpoints.” Claiming to provide a theory of the change from A to B left both A and B relatively undertheorized and maintained the god's-eye perspective of the anthropologists who, sitting above the fray, could observe and account for the change without being subjected to it themselves.

If anthropology is a *science* in the broadest sense of the term, one would expect its subject matter to press back on its analytical apparatuses. One would expect the ends of an analysis not to be given at the start of a research project. Ethnographic research would be an open-ended unfolding, not a drive toward some telos. Change in the world would then demand change in the theoretical and methodological toolkit of the discipline but not according to any predetermined path.

The ethnographic subject matter of the articles presented here most assuredly presses back against the ethnographer, and the product of the research represented in these articles is exemplary of some of the strategies being developed to deal with this fact. These articles share a commitment to science studies, but the fields of medicine, law, media, and the environment also come under their purview. Such fields have always posed productive challenges to anthropology for a number of interconnected reasons, as medical, legal, and ecological anthropologists (among others) have long noted. They all escape their frames: No matter how you attempt to bind them, they seep out and seemingly touch everything. To take Bruno Latour's (1993) famous example, Is the hole in the ozone layer an environmental problem? A political issue? A media event? A scientific fact? A medical catastrophe? It is all of these things and more, and the attempt to specify it in terms of one or the other inevitably calls forth data and explanation from the

other domains. Such fields as medicine, science, media, law, and environment pose challenges to modernist analytical toolkits because they are always already complex hybrids of nature and culture. As Latour writes

where are we to classify the ozone hole story, or global warming or deforestation? Where are we to put these hybrids? Are they human? Human because they are our work. Are they natural? Natural because they are not our doing. Are they local or global? Both. As for the human masses that have been made to multiply as a result of the virtues and vices of medicine and economics, they are no easier to situate. In what world are these multitudes to be housed? Are we in the realm of biology, sociology, natural history, ethics, sociobiology? This is our own doing, yet the laws of demography and economics are infinitely beyond us. Is the demographic time bomb local or global? Both. Thus, the two constitutional guarantees of the moderns—the universal laws of things, and the inalienable rights of subjects—can no longer be recognized either on the side of Nature or on the side of the Social. [Latour 1993:50]

In addition to being complex hybrids, these fields are also all autodocumentary: Analytical and descriptive writing is an integral part of them and defines, for themselves and for others, what they are and what they are about. As in bureaucracy, finance, and other similar domains of expert knowledge, this autodocumentation is a kind of indigenous sociology of science (after Riles 2000), in which these fields analyze not only their own subjects—health, crime, and whatnot—but also reflexively analyze the fields themselves, their own boundaries, and their place in the world, or the place they wish to occupy in some imagined futures.

As autodocumentary, these fields always oscillate between the particular and the general (“this patient” vs. “medicine,” “this case” vs. “the law,” “this ecological niche” vs. “the environment,” “this news story” vs. “the media,” and “this experiment” vs. “science”), and they make their claims to knowledge on the basis of this oscillation. They are all performative, not simply descriptive, and as such they trouble the dichotomy between the material and the ideal. Does the news “report” on something that happened, or do its enframings and tellings make “what happened?”

These characteristics—bleeding across the frame, hybridity, autodocumentation or reflexivity, and the continual shift in perspective between general and particular to generate knowledge—are also, of course, hallmarks of anthropology. And at many levels of scale—ever since Malinowski, anthropology has shattered found frames to account for and analyze the worlds it describes (this “religious” practice has that “economic” function). Anthropology itself, as a form of knowledge production, is an exemplar of the reflexive hybridity of cultural and social worlds (this account brings “their” culture into “ours” so that “we” can understand it, ourselves, the human condition, etc.).

Science studies have made of this mutual entanglement of the subjects and objects of research a theoretical and methodological starting point. In so doing, however, science studies have also been forced to come to grips with the

claims of ethnographic realism that subtend the discipline. For how can ethnography re-present, at a metalevel, something with which it is hopelessly entangled? Can anthropology use its tricks of perspective and scale to document a field that is similarly involved in such tricks of perspective and scale in documenting itself and its own objects (Strathern 1991)? Representation itself seems to suggest that the one doing the representing occupies a time after the event being described. What happens, however, when the time of the analysis and the time of the object are coincident? When the ends of the analysis and of the object are not known, and never can be known, in advance? That indeed there is never an ending point, just a moment frozen for the purposes at hand, whatever they may be? Traditional ethnographic realism might be said to fail when it attempts to capture or fix emergent phenomena of which ethnography forms a part. And efforts to make anthropology “relevant” to the wider world might be said to fail when it is already given in the fields to which anthropologists direct their attention that ethnography, local knowledge, the particular, and the universal frameworks of knowledge that give them value are assumed to be part of the “expert knowledges” that structure such fields.

The response of some contemporary ethnography to this dilemma, as represented in the articles that follow, is not to shrink in fear of the hall of mirrors that this state of affairs might suggest. Neither is the reaction to return to either naive empiricism—“just the facts”—or muscular, but equally naive, structuralisms—“the economy/environment/policy/self-interest is the key that unlocks the secrets of the social.” Rather, these articles set questions of realism, representation, and relevance to one side as they throw themselves wholly into their subjects, which, they find, often have already engulfed them.

How, Mei Zhan asks, can anthropology talk about the kinds of transformation through consumption that became evident in debates over the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in southern China without invoking the tropes of transition that characterize many accounts of China’s experiments in market economy? SARS presents an occasion to reflect on the new urban middle classes’ emergent practices of consumption as productive of different subjectivities that can now not only “choose freely” but also, and by extension, choose unwisely. Media stories about the disease’s etiology pointed to southern Chinese people’s apparently insatiable appetites for “wild” animals like the civet cat. Zhan examines the media attention of the civet cat diagnostically and against accounts of China’s transformation that privilege the market and consumption as unmistakable signs of its participation in a universalized modernity or globalism. Consumption needs to be problematized, Zhan argues, as both a kind of incorporation (eating) and a kind of expenditure that muddle both the neat delineation of temporality involved in narratives of transition—“before” and “after” socialism—and the delineation of human and nonhuman bodies, despite their messy entanglements. Although some media focused on Chinese

people’s insatiable appetites for “wild” animals, Chinese media immediately after SARS marveled at soccer star David Beckham’s “perfect” and disciplined body, which, despite its “natural” effluences and excretia, became the perfect consumable. Does the ambiguity of “consumption” in English translate to Chinese or other languages in the same way?

Kaushik Sunder Rajan’s subject is the emergence of personalized medicine based on genetic profiling and its relationship to the political economy of pharmaceutical science, as well as subject formation in an unequal world. Rather than seeing political economy as prior or determinative in the last instance, Sunder Rajan shows how new kinds of venture capitalism and new kinds of pharmaceutical science coproduce one another. Both the science and the political economy are continually changing, and Sunder Rajan’s article attempts to convey that sense of unfolding dynamism. Like Zhan, Sunder Rajan is interested in the subject position of the consumer. Personalized medicine is a form of insurance against future illness and, at the same time, a form of insurance for the pharmaceutical industry. It guarantees a steady supply of future consumer-patients who, because their medicine will be custom made, present a market of infinite variety and, thus, infinite profitability. The paradox of personalized medicine is that even as it produces the unique consumer-patient as a particular kind of subject, it depends on clinical trials that require—indeed, consume—another kind of subject: unemployed former mill workers in India whose predicament eerily recalls that of the English industrial working class described by Karl Marx. The Indian state produces and manages its population as potential experimental subjects for Western genomic science and corporate interests as part and parcel of its own neoliberalization. The market seems universal, as in Zhan’s case, but its instantiations are emergent phenomena not adequately captured by the tropes of transition that once guided anthropological discussions of modernization and social change. Sunder Rajan makes an important point, too, in noting that the very act of the Indian state’s “imitation” of market logics, “because of the act of imitation, changes the conditions of emergence of those very same market systems.” The “same” market and the “same” science in different locales are “incongruent,” Sunder Rajan argues, and they compel new theoretical reflection on imitative desires and the “as if”—as if Western, as if market-based, as if modern—subjects, objects, and social fields they create. Such subjects are not limited to the consuming patient and the experimental subject of pharmaceutical science but to the subject of the ethnographer, as well. For the ethnographer, like the Indian state, attempts to imitate or replicate the worlds that she or he studies, and that very replication creates knowledge of itself as “incongruent manifestation” of the emergences in which it participates.

Tim Choy focuses on the convergence between anthropological knowledge and the knowledge production of his subjects, who are involved in debates over environmental politics as well as over the place of experts in setting policies and environmental agendas. The case

concerns a garbage incinerator in Hong Kong. Central to Choy's account is the interplay between the general and the particular as modes of making truth and forging persuasive arguments. Choy argues that anthropological critique cannot simply fall back on the ethnographic particular, the claim that science must be understood in its local context, when that same position has been taken up by other actors in the social field under investigation—in this case, the state. Pointing out that knowledge is situated at once preserves the god's-eye perspective of the anthropologist and, more crucially, fails to generate new knowledge, because that very move is the basis for the state's knowledge and the policy pronouncements that flow from it. Like Sunder Rajan, Choy is interested in what happens during the replication of expert knowledge; how translation restages and also authorizes some expert knowledge as mobile, universal, and as "expert," introducing the kinds of incongruities that Sunder Rajan discusses and the contingencies that form the subject of Zhan's analysis of SARS. If what Choy calls "articulated knowledges"—"knowledges performatively scaled, linked, and mobilized through translation" (this issue)—are the form of the political discussion over the environment and its creation of expert knowledge, then anthropology becomes another point of articulation in the emerging skeletal framework of international environmental action. The politics here are not the politics of neat and clean change or transformation from one state to another but, rather, involve emergent identifications, and loose particular-universal unities catalyzed by the mediating processes integral to the making of all expert knowledges, including anthropology.

The article by Kim Fortun and Mike Fortun makes most explicit why the old paradigm of the critique of science, framed in terms of contexts or interests, can no longer be sustained. Foregrounding the ethical debates of toxicologists undergoing their own paradigm shifts, Fortun and Fortun, like Zhan and Sunder Rajan, are interested in subject formation in expert domains, but it is the particularly ethical character of subject formation that takes center stage in their analysis. Note how their use of the concept of "enunciatory communities," as opposed to "epistemic communities," highlights the emergent nature of the science and its ethnography here. Where an "epistemic community" might suggest an already concretized epistemological warrant undergirding scientific practice, an "enunciatory community" emphasizes continual and unsettled discussion, discovery, and surprise at the set of emergences into which the toxicologists as well as other anthropologists are thrown, very much in the present and with little indication of the direction of the uncertain future. In attempting to forge a "civic science," toxicologists demonstrate a "care for the data" that enables them to do the work of cultural critique: challenging received wisdom, insisting on what we do not know instead of providing ready-made answers to outdated questions, and ultimately obviating older

criticisms one might direct toward their science. If toxicologists once served the state and industry, they now serve the state and industry, criticize their servitude, and muddle along in creating new notions of ethics to understand and guide it. To Fortun and Fortun, the ethical practice of toxicologists is, thus, not so much a contribution to the ethnographic record (although it is that) as it is a source of inspiration for anthropology to engage scientists on their own ethical and scientific terms.

If Zhan invokes Claude Lévi-Strauss (civet cats are good to think), Fortun and Fortun invoke Marcel Mauss in calling for a kind of generalized reciprocity with scientists, one that "tolerates times out of joint, the not-always-predictable circuit of gifts, and the way exchange can work even when not a simple, reciprocal transfer that returns an investment" (this issue). Fortun and Fortun's notion of "friendship" as an ethnographic method bears a family resemblance to Choy's articulated knowledges, Sunder Rajan's imitation, and Zhan's consumption as incorporation and as expenditure. For all of these authors, the complexity of the present cannot simply be grasped by invoking that complexity and leaving the description and analysis at that. Instead, it requires an accounting for the enmeshment of the observer and the observed, together with their mutually reinforcing, yet oftentimes incongruent, knowledge formations. The point of an emergence is that you do not know where it is going. The point of an anthropology of emergence is not to attempt to achieve the universal language adequate to all transformation, but to go along for the ride, in mutual, open-ended, and yet limited entanglements, which one might call friendship, or, perhaps, ethnography.

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NOTES

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