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The Sustainability of an Anthropology of the Anthropocene

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, 0317 Oslo, Norway; t.h.eriksen@sai.uio.no

Abstract: The societies studied in early social and cultural anthropology were by default considered what we would now call sustainable, in that they were assumed to be capable of reproducing themselves indefinitely, changing only incrementally and almost imperceptibly. Change was considered to be caused by exogenous factors such as colonialism. The contrast with the contemporary practices and theories of anthropology is striking: The anthropology of the Anthropocene accepts globalisation as a fact, seeing societies as interlinked and culture as unbounded, and threats to sustainability are mainly conceptualised in terms of ecological devastation and climate change. The notion of sustainable development, introduced in 1987 and later elaborated in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, shares the global vision of contemporary anthropology but presupposes economic growth and brackets cultural diversity. To this discourse and its associated practices, anthropology is making major contributions, profiting from the methodological advances made a century ago, but contextualising ethnography in the global Anthropocene, using the tools of the discipline to critique facile universalism, engaging in dialogue with local worlds and showing that there are many alternatives. The methodologies devised for research in ostensibly unchanging village societies are still relevant for research on global crises, but the new anthropology is by necessity interdisciplinary.

Keywords: structural-functionalism; Anthropocene; overheating; history of anthropology; ethnographic method

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1. Introduction

By common consent, sustainability refers to a quality enabling something to sustain itself, in other words, to be capable of reproducing itself without undermining the conditions for its own existence. However, everything changes; nothing exists unchanged forever, and thus the concept of sustainability needs to incorporate the possibility of some change. Seen from the perspective of evolution, life has sustained itself on the planet for about 3.5 billion years, but it changes relentlessly and continuously. The five mass extinctions in the history of life exterminated up to 90 per cent of all living creatures [1]. The most famous is the last, the meteor or comet crashing into the Yucatán 66 million years ago known as the Chicxulub impactor, which killed about three-quarters of life on Earth, including all dinosaurs (apart from some birds, [2]). So, was the Cretaceous a sustainable biosphere? Not in the long term, since it ended abruptly and catastrophically, but this was a result of coincidence. Its demise was not of its own making, unlike the potential collapse of contemporary human civilization owing to environmental destruction and climate change. Life changed and evolved throughout the Mesozoic era, and the most famous of all dinosaurs, Tyrannosaurus Rex, entered the stage just a couple of million years before the mass extinction event.

A less rigid definition therefore seems necessary. Let us propose that 'a sustainable system is one which is capable of reproducing itself for an extended period without undermining its own conditions, absorbing incremental changes without collapsing.' This would be an acceptable delineation of the concept to most ecologists. It should nevertheless be noted that sustainability is typically defined with reference to three dimensions—economic, social and environmental, although the latter has increasingly dominated the sustainability discourse both in policy circles and academic work [3]. However, the concern with ecological sustainability is recent as a major preoccupation in policy and research. What I

endeavour to do in this essay is to discuss the relationship of anthropology to sustainability in the following way: First, I note how steady-state equilibrium models dominated early- to mid-20th century anthropology; that is to say that societies were considered by default sustainable. Second, I trace the changes in the discourse on sustainability. The third part of the essay shows how accelerated change since 1945, but especially since 1990, has led to a re-framing of social theory and a refocusing of anthropological research. The final part shows which unique contributions anthropology can make to the understanding of sustainability, which changes are taking place in the discipline and which of the classic virtues of early scientific anthropology are worth retaining into an Anthropocene future where the subject matter is very different from that of the early post-Victorian anthropologists.

2. Sustainability as Social Reproduction

In the history of the discipline of anthropology, the concept of sustainability recalls the equilibrium models characteristic of early- to mid-20th century social anthropology, notably structural-functionalism. According to its adherents, societies generally contain mechanisms enabling them to reproduce themselves indefinitely, regardless of the turnover in personnel. As the leading structural-functionalist theorist A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) stated, in his Presidential Address 'On Social Structure' delivered to the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1940: 'The actual relations of Tom, Dick and Harry or the behaviour of Jack and Jill may go down in our field note-books and may provide illustrations for a general description. But what we need for scientific purposes is an account of the form of the structure.' [4] He then adds, for clarification, that the continuity represented in the structure 'is not static like that of a building, but a dynamic continuity, like that of the organic structure of a living body. Throughout the life of an organism its structure is being constantly renewed; and similarly the social life constantly renews the social structure.' (ibid.)

Within this school of thought, a major problem consisted in explaining change. Radcliffe-Brown's successor Meyer Fortes [5] wrote a celebrated article about time and change in Ashanti households, but the analysis really demonstrated the cyclical logic of reproduction. Fortes showed how, at a microsociological level, stability was maintained in the household structure in spite of the flux in personnel owing to births, deaths and departures of grown children.

From a different theoretical vantage-point, but perhaps less different than many assume [6], Gregory Bateson (1904–1980) wrote about homeostasis and the 'steady state' of Balinese culture, in the same Festschrift to Radcliffe-Brown, where Fortes's analysis of the Ashanti household cycles was published [7]. The central puzzle in Bateson's analysis of Balinese culture consists of its lack of climax, which, in his view, required explanation. Conflict is avoided, and aggression is rarely observed, but so are direct expressions of mutual affection. Greed and personal ambition are frowned upon: 'There are very few Balinese who have the idea of steadily maximizing their wealth or property; these few are partly disliked and partly regarded as oddities.' ([7], p. 124). In the theoretical discussion following the ethnographic account, Bateson relates the theory of games to Balinese forms of behaviour, concluding that it does not fit: 'Neither the individual nor the village is concerned to maximize any simple variable. Rather, they would seem to be concerned to maximize something which we may call stability, using this term perhaps in a highly metaphorical way' ([7], p. 132).

Moreover, the mechanisms of self-reinforcing escalation described as schismogenic in Bateson's earlier work on the Iatmul cannot be identified among the Balinese either. Their *ethos* favours a steady state both socially and emotionally, seems to contain no germ of willed change and actively seeks to inhibit tendencies towards what Bateson calls 'cumulative interaction'. If Bateson's Balinese can be said to maximise anything, it is likely to be beauty and harmony, which would imply that Balinese culture contains mechanisms militating against change.

Since Bateson's fieldwork, carried out with his then wife Margaret Mead in 1936, the Balinese population has quadrupled from a little over a million to 4.3 million, largely

because of immigration from other parts of Indonesia. It is now an island highly geared towards tourism, with extensive contacts with foreign countries and a highly commercialised tourist industry. In some respects, contemporary Bali exemplifies unsustainable runaway changes, quite contrary to the situation studied by Bateson: There is a major waste problem, there are chronic traffic jams, growing inequality and an infrastructure which has remained in a 'steady state' amid rapid changes in other domains and which is utterly incapable of serving the booming population.

It can be retorted that the exogamous changes may not have affected the Balinese *ethos*, but they do affect the sustainability of the island, at least in an ecological sense, and as Leo Howe [8] shows in an updated analysis of Balinese society, stereotypical images of Balinese are negated by the complex ways in which they negotiate their relationship with fast change.

To Radcliffe-Brown, the interlocking social institutions that make up society are a powerful negentropic force, imposing social order where there would otherwise have been chaos. Bateson, who eventually grew closer to a more psychologically oriented American anthropology than its sociologically anchored British counterpart, rejected a sharp distinction between society and culture, but tended to see individual agency as being shaped and informed by passions, symbols and the quest for meaning. In his Metalogue 'Why do things get in a muddle' ([9], pp. 13–18), his daughter's chronically untidy room becomes a poignant image of the second law of thermodynamics. As the thinly fictionalised Mary Catherine Bateson says at the outset, 'people spend a lot of time tidying things, but they never seem to spend time muddling them'. The father explains that 'there are more ways which you call "untidy" than there are ways which you call "tidy"', and in a final flourish, concludes that 'there are infinitely many muddled ways—so things will always go toward muddle and mixedness' ([9], p. 18).

Culture and society, whichever way one defines them (or refuses to), are the most powerful negentropic tools at our disposal outside of the biosphere itself. Radcliffe-Brown was aware of this, seeing that keeping a society going, reproducing itself, producing integration and predictability for its members, was not accomplished once and for all; notwithstanding the criticism that led to the demolition of structural-functionalism, Radcliffe-Brown was perfectly well aware that this task was never completed; it continued indefinitely.

In quite different, but not incompatible ways, Radcliffe-Brown and Bateson explored issues relevant for theorisation of sustainability; one studying how institutions interlocked to produce a tight social structure, the other looking at self-correcting systems re-establishing equilibria (or not) when brought out of balance.

One of Radcliffe-Brown's students who did study irreversible change was Max Gluckman (1911–1975), whose team of researchers—initially in Livingstone, eventually in Manchester—studied urbanisation in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) from the 1940s to the 1960s. Trained as a structural-functionalist, Gluckman developed ingenious ways of reconciling the quest for stable societies with the acknowledgment of historical change, such as in his analysis of carnevalesque 'rituals of rebellion' [10]. In a major lecture from 1966, he argues that equilibrium models can illuminate social change [11], using several ethnographic examples from Southern Africa to show that stability is re-established after a period of turmoil. Less theoretically sophisticated than the cybernetic models with which Bateson worked at the same time, Gluckman does not accept continuous change as a dimension of social life, but rather sees stability as the norm, flux as problematic.

Anthropology and social theory generally have changed significantly since the mid-20th century. In the last few decades, what social scientists have come to expect is change and unstable configurations, and what requires an explanation no longer seems to be change but rather stability—quite the opposite of the challenges perceived by the structural-functionalists. For this reason, it is a matter of some interest that the methodologies used in ethnographic fieldwork remain almost unchanged since the interwar period, although the foci and theories of the discipline have changed. I shall have more to say about this later, but allow me first to consider a few contemporary views on sustainability.

3. Contradictions of Sustainability

On fieldwork in Queensland some years ago, my main interest was the tension, or contradiction, between growth and sustainability [12]. The city in which I worked is virtually marinated in fossil fuels and largely controlled by corporations, of which the mining company Rio Tinto Alcan is historically the most important. Local politicians often spoke about sustainability, describing the challenges to sustainability in the community. They were adamant about sustainability being a paramount concern and an important goal for the city council and public administration.

Eventually, I was given to understand that although pollution and emissions from industry were a local concern of some significance, especially when health scares erupted, sustainability tended to refer to the two other pillars of the concept, namely, social and economic factors. They saw a sustainable community as one capable of reproducing itself, one that offered good jobs, reliable services, safety and security. Sustainability in the ecological sense did not enter the public discourse. Although many locals, including some councillors, were determined to mitigate and reduce the negative impact of industry on the local ecology, the term sustainability was reserved for the overall health of the community, with an emphasis on jobs and prosperity, security and civility.

According to the anthropologists Brightman and Lewis [13], the term sustainability, or *Nachhaltigkeit*, was first used in Saxony in the early 18th century. At the time, the environmental understanding of the concept was central. The issue at the time concerned the continued viability of forests at a time when the use of wood for early industrial enterprises was increasing. *Nachhaltigkeit* referred to responsible stewardship over the forests, which would entail their ability to regenerate themselves, as opposed to the irreversible changes converting forests into meadows and farmland. However, the most influential application of the term came more than two centuries later, when the concept *sustainable development* was established in the UN report *Our Common Future* [3,14] in an attempt to reconcile economic growth with a serious concern for the environment. Sustainable development, according to the report, 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

Although the concept of sustainable development is recent, a concern with ecologically sustainable practices has been important to many of the societies studied by anthropologists [15]. The allegedly stable village societies favoured by early- to mid-20th century anthropology were not necessarily equipped with cosmologies or ethics dictating sustainable practices; they were 'cold' in Lévi-Strauss's [16] sense, lacking indigenous concepts of societal development and change. The global problems of ecological sustainability are directly linked to modernity, capitalism, industrialism and the ideology of growth and progress [17]. Nonmodern societies were not necessarily ecologically sustainable, and they often transformed local ecologies to their own benefit, but they did not undermine the conditions for human life in ways even remotely resembling the scale and velocity witnessed today. People whose lives are not dominated by state and market forces even today represent alternatives to the ideologies and practices of global capitalism [18,19].

In 2015, the United Nations announced its 17 sustainability goals, which currently guide development efforts in and outside of the UN system. Several of the goals have an ecological component, but only one (SDG 13, Climate Action) sees ecological challenges as the main obstacles to sustainability. In the capsule summaries of the goals on the SDG website, the word sustainability is used extensively, for example, in 'sustainable agriculture' (SDG 2), 'sustainable industrialization' (SDG 9), 'make cities . . . resilient and sustainable' (SDG 11) and 'sustainable and modern energy' (SDG 7). The term, massively overused in the presentation of the SDGs, risks becoming a vacuous placeholder.

The term *sustainable development* introduced in the 1987 Brundtland Report is irresistible in its optimism and conjuring power. It was presented, and still is widely understood, as a magic bullet enabling humanity to continue on the path of economic growth and expansion, while simultaneously ensuring ecological viability. It is often argued that the fulfilment of all 17 sustainable development goals would be impossible, that a main problem

consists in the continued commitment to growth, and that the only sustainable option is degrowth [20,21]. A socially and economically sustainable society may easily be imagined, and many such societies exist, but in a capitalist world committed to expansion and technological progress, the third pillar—ecology—will not fit. Anthropologists have often pointed out this contradiction, from Bruno Latour's reworking of James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis [22] to Alf Hornborg's demonstration of the inherently destructive character of the fossil fuel economy [17].

The anthropologists' world of *TAMA* (There Are Many Alternatives), contrasted with the *TINA* world of neoliberal capitalism, has been depicted ethnographically for many years, if not turned into an acronym until now. These alternatives do not always come across as attractive for contemporary members of the global middle and upper classes. In Gapun, a village in the lower Sepik valley where Don Kulick worked intermittently for many years, starting in the mid 1980s, few reach the age of sixty, the diet is monotonous, and there are few if any opportunities for intellectual development [23]. Others report similar experiences. Fredrik Barth was carrying out fieldwork in Bhutan in the 1990s, and just after his return from one of these trips, I asked him what it had been like. 'Well,' he said, 'it is the Middle Ages, you are served a lot of tea laced with stale butter, there is no heating, hard mattresses and no running water, so you might safely say that it is not a place you go to for a pleasure trip.'

As has been demonstrated in recent years (see [13] for a representative sample), anthropologists have already made important contributions to the sustainability discourse, not least owing to their comprehensive empirical knowledge of the range of options available to humanity. The lengthy exposure to other ways of life through fieldwork is an effective inoculation against essentialism and romanticism, yet anthropologists of very different theoretical orientations have repeatedly emphasised the need to enter into dialogue, with a view to learning rather than teaching, with Indigenous groups who have demonstrably lived ecologically sustainably for generations.

Yet there is no easy solution. There are nearly eight billion people now, the majority living in urban areas, and although global ecological sustainability is possible, nobody would see a turn towards a way of life resembling that of the remaining Indigenous groups as a solution for all. Rather, in order to take Escobar's [19] notion of 'the pluriverse' on board in a serious way, it may be concluded that modernity will have to solve its own contradictions largely by its own means, even if inspiration can be sought outside.

A World of Accelerated Change

The classic anthropologists whose models of stability and steady states I presented in the first part of this article made it easy for themselves. They generally ignored the kind of societies in which they themselves lived—fast-paced, evolving, changing, riding the waves of progress and growth ideologies. When Radcliffe-Brown commented on colonial societies in Africa, he saw them as anomalies. Referring to South Africa, he concluded that 'it is an extreme example of a society compounded of heterogeneous elements. As such it has a certain instability, due to the lack of adjustment of divergent interests' ([4], p. 1). He never developed this analysis to any great extent, but it is clear that this kind of society could not easily be studied within the framework of structural-functionalism.

The world studied by contemporary anthropologists, by contrast, is defined precisely through its complexity, change, frictions, unintended side-effects and paradoxes of identity. Increasingly, a concern with anthropogenic climate change has become a central context for the localised research carried out within the discipline, and the need to contextualise ethnographic research within a global framework of change, volatility, climate crisis and mutual dependence has become imperative in a fast-increasing number of anthropological research projects [24–26].

Contemporary anthropologists speak about life on a damaged planet [27]. Some, seeing limitations in the concept of the Anthropocene, seek to replace it with the Capitalocene [28] in order to emphasise that the cause of environmental destruction is not

humanity as such but a particular economic system. Others have proposed to speak of the Plantationocene [29], arguing that not only are literal plantations proliferating but also that the standardising logic of the plantation characterises effects of globalisation on human societies as well. The science writer Charles Mann, who has proposed the Homogenocene as a descriptor for the post-1992 world, also emphasises the production of similarities, simplification and standardisation [30].

A premise for these proposals towards a renewal of anthropological theory is the acknowledgement that the planet is seriously unsustainable owing to anthropogenic climate change, the overexploitation of resources and environmental destruction in general. The Anthropocene concept, first proposed by the atmospheric scientist Paul Crutzen and the limnologist Eugene Stoermer [31], has—as the above paragraph indicates—been productive in stimulating a refocusing of social theory by including the non-human world, the biosphere in a broad sense, into disciplines which have historically limited themselves to the study of social relations and cultural worlds. The Great Acceleration [32] refers to the historically unique period since 1945, which has seen rapid changes in human civilization, with perceptible and worrisome impacts on the biosphere. In my own work on 'overheating' [33], I have argued that there has been an *acceleration of acceleration* since the end of the Cold War around 1990. In a number of domains, from tourism to energy use, from electronic communication to world trade, the accelerated changes of the post-World War II decades have further accelerated, producing a series of fast changes without a thermostat or governor enabling control. Overheating refers to a kind of runaway globalisation. Change, growth and development have underpinned the ideology of modernity since the 19th century as positive ideals and as societal projects. What is new about the contemporary situation is the speed, scope and scale of change, coupled with the lack of a thermostat, which is quickly undermining the conditions for the very civilization that has produced the predicament.

The globalisation of modernity, its discontents and its increasingly severe unintended consequences, present anthropology with new challenges both theoretical and empirical. In this era, it is not just the scientist who has the future in his bones, as C. P. Snow [34] would have it.

The current shift towards a concern with sustainability in the context of climate change, which can be identified in many fields in intellectual life, should thus be understood as an outcome of the fact that in the last few decades, the belief in progress has been weakened and no glorious future is in sight. Whereas sustainability is frequently conceptualised through its three interrelated pillars—economic, social, environmental—the emphasis has shifted, since the turn of the millennium, towards its environmental dimension, owing to the momentous impact of anthropocenic climate change.

4. An Unsustainable World

The growing human population of about eight billion travels, produces, consumes, innovates, communicates, fights and reproduces in a multitude of ways, and we are increasingly aware of each other as we do so. The steady acceleration of communication and transportation of the last two centuries has facilitated contact and made isolation difficult and is weaving the growing global population ever closer together, influencing but not erasing cultural differences, local identities and power disparities. Population growth is skewed and at its fastest in some of the poorest regions. The demographer Massimo Livi Bacci [35] predicts that the population of Nigeria, twice that of Germany in 2017, will be eight times the German population in 2050, with unknown, but doubtless significant, consequences for wealth and poverty, migration and stability. Since we are now, globally, eight times as many as we were at the end of the Napoleonic wars, it comes as no surprise that we use more energy today; however, the fact is that energy use in the world has grown much faster than the world population. In 1820, each human used on an average 20 Gigajoules a year. Two centuries later, energy consumption has risen by a factor of four thanks to the technology that enabled the large-scale use of fossil fuels [33].

The quadrupling in energy use is in reality a growth by a factor of 32, since there are eight times as many of us today as in 1814. The side-effects are well known. The visible and directly experienced ones are pollution and environmental degradation. Those effects which are more difficult to observe and more consequential are the long-term climate changes and the depletion of nonrenewable resources.

Writing at the beginning of the industrial revolution, Thomas Malthus famously predicted widespread famine and social unrest unless population was kept in check. His *Essay on the Principle of Population* from 1798 [36] had just been published when the fossil fuel revolution took off, almost immediately proving him wrong by enabling a massive growth in productivity. Some of Malthus' insights may still turn out to be valuable, now that the side-effects of the fossil fuel revolution are becoming so visible, and the seminal *Limits to Growth* report from 1972 can be read as a neo-Malthusian treatise [37]. If population had not begun to grow exponentially in the nineteenth century, humanity might have evaded the most serious side-effects of the fossil fuel revolution. Had there just been a billion of us, we could probably have done pretty much as we liked. The planet would in all likelihood have recovered. As an experiment of thought, it could be imagined that the global population increased eightfold without the fossil fuel revolution. In such a scenario, admittedly empirically impossible, the climate crisis would have been avoided, but the great majority of the world would have lived in a state of chronic material scarcity. Rather, we now live in a world where modernity has shifted to a higher gear, where there is full speed ahead in most areas. It has produced growth and prosperity, but it is also a volatile and ultimately self-destructive situation, as shown in Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen's *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* [38]. Endless growth is theoretically impossible. This is a central conundrum of contemporary modernity, which makes conventional ideas of progress and development unfeasible.

Refocusing Social Theory

The contemporary world of climate change and the Anthropocene, and that of global transformation in general, has provided research grants, jobs and publishing contracts for many academics. Some even become famous, at least within their orbit. Let me quickly mention a few examples in order to illustrate the shift in focus. In sociology, Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck wrote important works about unpredictability, while Hartmut Rosa has devoted his research to social acceleration [39–41]. Paul Crutzen, the originator with Eugene Stoermer of the concept of the Anthropocene, is the co-author of a much-cited article, with his colleague Will Steffen and the historian John McNeill [42], on social aspects of climate change, while the archaeologist Joseph Tainter has produced important analyses of the causes of civilizational collapse in the past. Tainter's pathbreaking work, in particular, shows ways in which contemporary societies can learn from archaeological research when faced with mounting or looming crises [43–45]. In his comments on the present, which draw heavily on the collapse of the Roman and Maya empires, climate change comes across as just one factor in accounting for the decline of complex societies. The decisive cause will, in his view, consist of decreased marginal returns on investments in energy (EROI), owing to population growth and subsequent intensification of food production with decreasing returns, coupled with growth in bureaucratic, logistic and transport costs. Presently, resource shortages, a direct result of anthropoid dominance of the planet, may be a more acute problem than climate change according to Tainter. Since the early 19th century, we have been able to exploit enormous amounts of energy; at first just in the shape of abundant surface-near coal deposits, subsequently through the harnessing of oil and gas for the betterment of humanity. The fossil fuel revolution enabled us to support a very high and fast-growing global population with seemingly insatiable desires for consumption. Yet the cost of taking out fossil fuels grows as the low-hanging fruit has been used up. At the same time, production relying on fossil fuels is tantamount to destruction [46], in a dual sense, since we are simultaneously eating up the capital which it has taken the planet millions of years to produce and are undermining the conditions for our own civilization

by altering the climate and ruining the environment on which we rely. Coal and its close relatives, the salvation of humanity for two centuries, is now becoming our damnation. The lesson from cultural history may nevertheless be that lean societies, decentralised and flexible, with less bureaucracy than farming, fewer PR people than fishermen, are the most sustainable in the long term. As Tainter remarks: 'Complex societies . . . are recent in human history. Collapse then is not a fall to some primordial chaos, but a return to the normal human condition of lower complexity' [43]. The current form of human adaptation is anything but sustainable, no matter how you view it.

Perspectives from the humanities on the Anthropocene are also developing fast, and one particularly powerful and provocative book is Roy Scranton's *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* [47], where the author, an American ex-soldier who had driven an armoured vehicle over the crushed remnants of Sumerian civilization as he entered the ruins that used to be Baghdad, urges us to learn to die gracefully, as a civilization, by listening to the distant voices of long deceased fellow humans speaking to us from the past. It may also be relevant to mention historians such as Sverker Sörlin, a major environmental historian and the author of a recent book-length essay on the Anthropocene [48], as well as the challenging recent work of the environmental philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen [49], who explores panpsychism and Indigenous cosmologies against the backdrop of Western philosophy since Plato. From law scholars to environmental psychologists, from evolutionary biologists to literary scholars, there is an ongoing effort in many if not most subdivisions of academia to redefine our purpose, our study object and our own subject position. The field of theorising and research on the Anthropocene is mushrooming rhizomatically.

5. Conclusion: A Programme for an Anthropology of the Anthropocene

This is the kind of world in which anthropological research is now positioning itself. There are no sharp boundaries in such a world, only partial connections and assemblages, some of them of global reach. There is no contrast between 'modern' and 'traditional' societies; there is cultural diversity but no cultures. In Radcliffe-Brown's time, the native, or even the savage, were perfectly respectable terms in scientific discourse. The effects of what Bateson spoke of as 'culture contact', while the sociologically minded Radcliffe-Brown preferred other terms, were seen to be detrimental, harmful and somewhat artificial. The least sustainable societies, in this view, were those which were overrun and irreparably damaged by colonialism. In fact, Radcliffe-Brown's teacher, the Melanesianist and polymath W. H. R. Rivers, expressed grave anxiety for the future of Melanesian societies following the onslaught of colonialism and missionary activity [50]. He saw indications of population decline in several islands and argued that many Melanesians, confronted with the vastly superior, but unattainable, civilization of the white man, lost their will to power and desire to live, descending into a lethargic stupor, indifferent and anomic.

The difference with the framework within which current anthropologists work is significant, and yet the social sustainability of small, stateless peoples today is also threatened by the exogenous forces of modernity. Ours is a continuous world where the threats to human sustainability are of a global nature, and a main task for anthropologists consists of connecting the scales, thereby showing the primacy of the local, the need for tailor-made strategies to deal with climate change in specific locations [26], yet connecting the nitty-gritty of ethnographic detail to global processes, the synchronicity of fieldwork to history.

Sustainability remains a slippery concept. I mentioned its use in forestry in the early 18th century, and according to the historian Peder Anker, it 'has been in use among economists for at least the last 250 years, specifically as a way to describe economic policies that can be sustained over a long period' [51]. The Brundtland commission which authored *Our Common Future* [14] searched for a balance between ecological sustainability and global justice, adding growth as an imperative and proposing the irresistibly seductive concept of sustainable development, which, to its critics, seems to indicate that you can have your cake and eat it too.

In this and later formulations of sustainability, including the 17 SDGs from 2015, global inequality is emphasised while cultural diversity is usually ignored. Even in the influential, sophisticated and original 'doughnut economics' model proposed by Kate Raworth [52], local knowledges and practices are bracketed; it is tacitly assumed that similar criteria for well-being and social sustainability apply everywhere. This is where the new anthropology of Anthropocene globalization, see, e.g., [19,26,27], is required more than anywhere else. Notwithstanding the differences between South American conceptualisations of *buen vivir*, the more theoretically oriented 'ontological turn', assemblage theory, actor-network theory, ecological phenomenology, more-than-human anthropology, materialist ecology and other attempts to come to terms with the contradictions of an overheated planet, there is something unmistakably anthropological about all these efforts. They seek to overcome Cartesian dualisms, evolutionist visions of humanity and forms of universalism that refuse dialogue with others. As phrased succinctly by Veronica Strang ([53], p. 265), 'anthropological theories are co-produced via collaboration with people having a diverse range of worldviews, and therefore depend heavily on precisely such an exchange of knowledges'. In addition, the new anthropology of the Anthropocene world is faced with the new challenge of decentring humanity. Just to what extent and in what ways the wider ecological contexts of humanity are to be incorporated empirically and theoretically is, and will be, debated. It is nonetheless evident by now that there can be no return to the anthropocentric, synchronous, myopic anthropology that successfully superseded the older evolutionist and diffusionist anthropology a century ago. The research questions which are now asked about what it is that makes a society sustainable are quite different from, and render obsolete, the questions raised in functionalist or structural-functionalist anthropology. To what extent the older anthropology—that of Tylor, Morgan, Haddon and Rivers—deserves a reappraisal is not the subject of this article, but the issue deserves to be examined: Was there, at the end of the day, a baby hidden in the dirty bathwater which was discarded so unceremoniously by Malinowski, Boas, Radcliffe-Brown and their descendants? For the truth is that 20th century anthropology emphasised the primacy of the local, often at the expense of ignoring its seamless integration into transnational systems, just as the ecological dimensions of human life were bracketed.

The new anthropology of the Anthropocene needs to retain and refine some of the defining traits of early- to mid-20th century anthropology, in spite of the fact that research priorities have changed dramatically in the last century. First, anthropology will have to continue to be based on *ethnography*: the time-consuming, detailed, meticulous mapping of local life-worlds. Second, it must be *comparative*, relating societies to one another in a bid to develop general theory. Third, the new anthropology continues to be *holistic* in contextualising ethnographic details within socio-cultural wholes.

Finally, the new anthropology is by necessity interdisciplinary, drawing on insights from disciplines as distinctive as history and biology. The impurity, hybridity and openness to other worlds of experience and nonhuman species on which anthropologists pride themselves, must be extended to other intellectual projects in academia as well. A concept of sustainability may yet prove to be a common denominator for these otherwise very different disciplines, the paramount question being how survival, human and nonhuman, can be possible in the long term on a planet which is slowly suffocating owing to the side-effects of humanity's hugely successful imperialist endeavours. For the sustainability concept to be useful, it must nevertheless be divested of its connection to an impossible idea of development as growth, and should instead be defined as the ability of a system to reproduce itself indefinitely without undermining the conditions for its own existence. In this lies not only a societal challenge for humanity but also an intellectual project that will keep anthropologists busy in the foreseeable future.

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