

# Visiting Knowledge in Anthropology: An Introduction

*Dominic Boyer*

Cornell University, USA

It is symptomatic of my dilemma in introducing this special issue of *Ethnos* that the title of this project went through a half-dozen different iterations before settling at 'Revisiting the Anthropology of Knowledge.' The provisional title had been 'New Directions in the Anthropology of Knowledge' but the farther we all delved into the problem of knowledge, the clearer it became that there was nothing particularly 'new' about anthropology's interest in it. The term 'revisitation' by contrast evokes a return engagement, even a home-coming. In truth, it would be difficult to locate anthropological research that did *not*, at some level, speak to and about human knowledge. Especially if one understands the standard referentiality of a term like 'knowledge' as codifying the habituated epistemic forms produced by the human capacity for meaningful semiosis (e.g., 'culture,' more or less, in its postwar anthropological trajectory), how could any investigation of meaningful action and experience not also, at once, be an investigation of local schemes and settlements of knowledge and modes of knowing?

Moreover, explicit engagement with certain dimensions of knowledge (particularly rationality, logic, and cognition) was one of the key watersheds in the disciplinary development of anthropology in the 20th century. The debates surrounding the characterizations of 'primitive' knowledge in texts like E.B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's *How Natives Think*, for example, centered anthropological discourse on the question of the universality of human epistemic forms, processes, and contents. Did primitives have the same logical and cognitive capabilities as moderns? Were their knowledge works different, but equivalently valid, or instead erroneous? Lucien Lévy-Bruhl argued that primitives had logical and cognitive capacities like us but that they were

unrigorous and unscientific in their application of them (Evans-Pritchard 1965:82). Meanwhile, in the United States, Boasians like Paul Radin argued oppositely and vehemently that primitive philosophers were in no way 'pre-logical' but rather just as rigorous in their application of logic and as creative in their knowledge works as moderns (1927). The critique of universalizing evolutionary paradigms of human cognition and behavior that was so central to the Boasian project necessarily (by virtue of the polemical character of the Boasians' argumentation) helped to sediment anthropological knowledge as doxically pluralistic. Rather than Culture, one spoke of cultures, each with its distinct patterns and principles.

The settlement of these debates (in 'mainstream' anthropological knowledge largely in favor of the Boasian position) now seems so utterly commonplace that it is sometimes difficult to retrieve what a decisive act of knowledge this was at the beginning of the professional history of the discipline. The critique of evolutionism in the Spencerian, Tylorian tradition drew a distinction between anthropology as a positive science of natural development and effects and anthropology as a social science of experiential, historical inquiry into the diversity, plurality, and unity of human social, cultural, and material forms. In other words, it completed a process that had begun already in the late 18th century to distinguish a 'pragmatic anthropology' (in Kant's terms), the study of what human beings make of themselves, from a 'physical anthropology,' the study of what human beings inherit from nature. This tension persisted over the course of the 19th century as anthropology developed on the fringes of natural history. To be sure, the centrality of historicism and pluralism to postwar anthropology in the US and elsewhere certainly did not dispel other, more positivistic and universalistic, imaginations of anthropology. Yet, it did define the normative ideals of social-cultural anthropology as a field science that forefronted and celebrated human diversity within the parameters of its local conditions. Born in this act of negating a particular science of knowing humanity, the pluralistic, pragmatic anthropology has been concerned with developing better modes of knowing ever since (hence our periodic reinvention of crises and redemptions of anthropological knowledge).

The point is that we are sounding deep waters here. The closer one begins to look at the parallel, continuously subdividing, trajectories of anthropological research in the 20th century, the more certain one becomes that the problem of 'knowledge' has always been at the center of anthropological attention. From the study of mythology, magic, science, and religion to more recent interest in the invention of traditions, social imaginaries, and

the ethnography of scientific research, the semiotic and epistemic interface between human communities and their social and natural environments, has been a central, perhaps the central, unifying polylogue of the discipline. I am loath to compile a list of most relevant works because there would be a real question as to what works one could possibly leave out.

\* \* \*

Yet, if the variety of ethnographic engagements with knowledge and even theories of knowledge within anthropology are legion, one can still consider a more limited number of analytical methods that anthropologists have utilized more or less as epistemological foundations for their knowledge-making (although anthropology has never been as energetic as some other disciplines in its fetishization of epistemological foundations). Alongside empiricism and ideationalism, which have well-tended roots in the Boasian and Malinowskian traditions of ethnology, one can also think of praxiological, semiological, psychoanalytic, poetic, historicist, and critical methods as seminal to a wide variety of different modes of anthropological knowing. Each of these methods has a venerable pedigree of its own and to some extent is updated for each subsequent generation in a new set of idioms and theoretical settlements. It is striking that the proponents of these various methods often lose themselves in conflict with one another as to which method leads to the most legitimately anthropological anthropology. And, yet, the methods are, in the experience of human knowing and knowledge, wholly interdependent on one another. Each takes some dimension of human knowing and centers it analytically, often providing rich and deep insight into the experience of its chosen dimension while concomitantly flattening other epistemic phenomena into trivialities or into functional consequences of the center. In other words, the analytic methods in question each proceed from the conscious distillation of some phenomenal dimension of the experience of knowing that is then treated as though it were the substantial and consequential center of knowledge itself.

The center is roving. For praxiology, the center is human activity, especially its capacities of making and doing and the recognition of subjective and objective agencies. For ideationalism, it is the self-awareness of consciousness-rational activity, its tokens, dynamics, and patterns. For psychoanalysis, it is self-awareness in tension with sexuality and affect, especially desire and dread. For poetics, it is self-awareness in tension with a sense of creative,

imaginative powers. For semiology, the center is language in its broadest sense, extending from the intimate intersubjective relations of semiosis to the formal attributes and capacities of the sign itself. For empiricism, it is the experiential encounter with the world. For historicism, the temporal and situational dimensions of this encounter are forefronted. For critique, the center is the capacity of negation in knowing, which is, often enough, conjoined with the possibility of perfection.

Please take this typology in the experimental spirit in which it is intended. It is provisional and certainly should be elaborated to account for other epistemic features that can be made epistemological. My selection is, to be sure, refracted by my own discourse communities. But, even in a more nuanced typology, I think that one would find the same process repeating itself. In each case, there is an effort to find secure epistemological foundations for anthropological knowledge through the distillation and substantialization of one dimension of the experience of knowing. This process of securing foundations, however, is intrinsically selective and therefore open to contest. Given that there are multiple dimensions of the experience of knowing and thus multiple potential epistemological foundations, it seems unlikely that any one of these positions will ever definitively disprove the validity of the others (although a great deal of intellectual energy is expended on precisely such pursuits).

For one thing, it is clear that most anthropologies alloy multiple methods in the practice of producing knowledge, some more reflexively than others. So, already, the notion of a pure typology can be rejected when considered in terms of actual knowledge-making practices. Instead, we might speak of the differential 'centered-ness' of different anthropological approaches and engagements. It is further not difficult to recognize how I have inserted my own alloyed phenomenological method into the mix here as though it were to provide the transcendental rubric for a constellation of other methods (see Boyer 2005, anthropologists invested in other methods could easily rewrite the preceding paragraphs in their own *métier*). My intention here, however, is not to advance one method over the others, to argue for one anthropological knowledge against others, but rather to draw attention to certain interdependent incommensurabilities in anthropological modes of apprehending knowledge that are rooted in what are experienced as different dimensions of knowledge itself. To paraphrase Dilthey, debating the relative validity of different analytical methods is less fruitful than trying to assure that none of them becomes trivial.

If such a 'clash of foundations' persists at the level of epistemology, it is unsurprising that this condition of anthropological knowledge has only been amplified by the segmentary organization of our specialized and professionalized academic culture. It is striking and representative of our own social situation as academics that certain methods will inevitably appear 'mainstream' and others 'marginal' and further either justly or unjustly so. Since each of us, as a part of the knowledge-work of professionalism, continuously objectifies for him or herself a positionality within 'the discipline,' we reciprocally constitute the image of a field, in Bourdieu's sense, within which different methods and theoretical settlements struggle for legitimacy and institutional validation. To my mind, this represents less an objective, extrinsic logic of practice, a 'social physics' to borrow another of Bourdieu's terms (1991:111), than the way in which the phenomenological encounter of professional intellectual experience with its conditions of possibility tends to reify the imagination of a battleground of ideas from which there is no intellectual escape. In other words, it is precisely our work to locate ourselves as social subjects within a complex environment of intellectual activity that reciprocally produces the fantasy of a bounded field of academic knowledge-making inhabited by different dispositions and interests and governed by a fully objective logic of practice. The corollary of this observation is that there is no meta-theory available to the anthropology of knowledge that is not itself a relational knowledge posing as an absolute. The dilemma is not ours alone as anthropologists – in the equivalently broad and diverse Kantian philosophical tradition that has so deeply and variously informed anthropology (from Hegel to Marx to Nietzsche to Dilthey to Husserl to the Frankfurt School to Foucault), ontological knowledge is always dangled like a carrot in front of the social scientist but then quickly reeled back into the perduring methodological dilemma of correlating subjective awareness, experience, and knowledge with stubbornly unknowable exteriorities.

\* \* \*

Given the venerable character of the problems engaged by the anthropology of knowledge, I think it is important to address the timing of the current revisitation. It is certainly significant that the anthropology of knowledge revisits us again in the wake of the so-called reflexive turns in anthropology in the late 1960s and mid 1980s. In this sense, one could think about the anthropology of knowledge as a response to reflexive anthropology, as an

effort to broaden the important epistemic issues already raised by the criticism of ethnographic representation to anthropological knowledge more broadly. Yet, thinking anthropologically about the anthropology of knowledge involves not only the Mannheimian exercise of tracing the proximate intellectual currents that inform interest in the problem of knowledge but also thinking about the social-structural factors intrinsic to anthropology as an intellectual practice that also inform discourse trends.

In this respect, it is important to observe that anthropology, as a discipline, is neither institutionally nor professionally the same enterprise that it was in the early decades of the 20th century. If anthropology in the early decades of the 20th century had a dual character, riven by debates between evolutionary and pluralistic paradigms, who can really pretend to be intimately familiar with the totality of contemporary research practices and analytical methods somewhat optimistically condensed under the singular heading of 'anthropology'? For one thing, anthropology now involves thousands of practitioners rather than dozens. It has become a highly institutionalized field of inquiry with normative professional trajectories and credentials. Anthropological practitioners have, in their intellectual labors of research, publication, and discussion, generated new subfields of inquiry at a, to some alarming and to others exhilarating, rate. With the proliferation of subfields, subdisciplinary specialization has intensified and the discursive unity of 'anthropology' has been stretched thin. Much of the intellectual energy and identity of 'the discipline' is now refracted through subdisciplinary discourse communities and has a rather more austere relationship to 'anthropology' in the singular. The very epistemic abundance of anthropologies-in-practice makes a fertile ground for a resurgence of analytical attention to problems of knowing and knowledge as anthropologists now must consider such a wide range of different qualities of knowledge that can be produced underneath a singular disciplinary rubric. With the proliferation of subdisciplines of epistemic activity, it seems somehow fitting that a subdiscipline of the 'anthropology of knowledge' would make a case for itself.

But I think that contemporary interest in knowledge is more than a parochially anthropological concern. In the complexifying networks of anthropological practice and discourse, one also finds a microcosm of the post-ww II expansion and specialization of knowledge economies more broadly. In the 'post-industrial' economy heralded by the likes of Daniel Bell and Jean-François Lyotard, knowledge has become a principal productive force in modern western society. It could also be claimed that 'knowledge'

has become a principal locus of interest for contemporary representations and practices of production. In the 1990s, for example, a variety of information economies sought, although not always successfully, to realize knowledge-as-commodity for the purposes of capitalization. But one sure success of the capitalization of knowledge was the reification of 'Knowledge' as a category encompassing a generic epistemic force applicable interchangeably to any context. As Marx once observed of Adam Smith, Smith was able to conceptualize universal categories like 'labor' and 'wealth' unknown to physiocratic economists precisely because his society was in the process of homogenizing and universalizing the character of human labor and social wealth through capitalist institutions of private property and wage labor (1978:240). Applying this insight to contemporary discourse, the apprehension of a generic category of 'Knowledge' moves hand-in-hand with the capitalization of semiotic and epistemic forms and processes characteristic of so-called 'post-industrial' capitalism. As 'knowledge workers' of a particular sort operating in a 'knowledge economy' it is therefore important to remain mindful that the problem of knowledge for anthropologists and other academics cannot be treated simply as a matter of conceptual interest. Rather, it is important to be clear that our own contemporary engagement with 'knowledge' is also always entangled with the economies of expertise (both external and internal to universities) that refract our professional identities, activities, and productivity.

\* \* \*

Malcolm Crick wisely commented in his seminal 1982 review article on the anthropology of knowledge that the anthropology of knowledge 'is not a subfield but merely a reminder of what anthropology is centrally concerned with' (p. 287). Perhaps the corollary of Crick's observation is that the value of the anthropology of knowledge comes less in acknowledging it than in concerning oneself with it. I have been struck, in coordinating this enterprise, at how the work of turning anthropology to look at others' knowledges has invariably meant symmetrically turning anthropology inward on its own epistemic practices, forms, and relations. If I have generally been comforted to use ethnography as a lens in my work, I found it increasingly becoming a mirror in this project. In this way, the anthropology of knowledge has been discomfiting: it aches a little to do the anthropology of knowledge just like it aches to do any effective therapy. All the essays in this collection have explored this symmetry and have asked what the anthropology of knowledge

implies for anthropological knowledge whether in terms of the politics of scientific authority and representation (Smith), the phenomenologies of expertise (Boyer), skills (Harris), and thirdness (Kohn), or the epistemic devices of anthropological analysis and representation (Reed). Of course, there is nothing strikingly new about our analytic moves here. As noted above, anthropology has been nothing if not a reflexive social science since the 1920s. But past critical capacity is easily forgotten, all the better to be retrieved and hypostasized at moments of opportunity (like this one).

The originality of the enterprise emerges instead, as is so often the case with anthropology, in its ethnographic encounters, whether in Kimbra Smith's study of the politics of expertise and authority in producing archaeological knowledge in Peru, or in Eduardo Kohn's study of the firstness and secondness of hunting narratives among the Runa, or in Mark Harris's study of the historical constitution of the *ribeirinho* taskscape, or in my own study of professionalism and the corporeality of expertise in eastern German journalism, or in Adam Reed's study of the relationships of bloggers in the United Kingdom to their texts. Given the abundance of epistemic activity now visible both inside and outside of anthropology, it is perhaps not surprising that these projects provoke and evoke both in their particularities and in their implications for knowledge more broadly. In their glimpses into quite different contexts and dimensions of knowledge, they do vindicate Crick's argument that the anthropology of knowledge is simply a different means for apprehending the epistemic engagement of human beings with their environments, the issue that has always stood at the center of anthropological inquiry. It is the arts, politics, contexts of knowing (of others and sometimes of our own) that comprise the subject matter of this issue.

### References

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited by J.B. Thompson, translated by G. Raymond & M. Adamson. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Boyer, Dominic. 2005. *Spirit and System: Media, Intellectuals, and the Dialectic in Modern German Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Crick, Malcolm. 1982. Anthropology of Knowledge. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 11:287-313
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1965. *Theories of Primitive Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Marx, Karl & Friedrich Engels. 1978. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by R.C. Tucker. New York: Norton.
- Radin, Paul. 1927. *Primitive Man as Philosopher*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

Copyright of *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* is the property of Routledge, Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.