

The Four Fields in Anthropology: getting stuck in a conclusion

Danny de Vries, February 4, 2001

We look at it and do not see it;

Its name is the invisible.

We listen to it and do not hear it;

Its name is the inaudible.

We touch it and do not find it;

Its name is the Subtle (formless).

These three cannot be further probed,

and hence merge into one . . .

Infinite and boundless, it cannot be given any name;

It reverts to nothingness.

This is called shape without shape, form without object.

It is the vague and elusive.

Meet it and you will not see its head.

Follow it and you will not see its back.

14. (Lao Tzu: the Tao of Reality).

I find in my communication interface with the postmodern, electronic cyberworld a message from the Anthropology and Environment Section of the AAA. Having paid my dues to the section (since membership to an AAA section is mandatory if one wants to be an AAA member) I am challenged to submit a proposal for invited sessions relating to the 2001 program theme: *"100 Years of Anthropology: The Transformation of a Discipline."* In the email, Heléna Ragoné, Executive Program Chair for the 2001 AAA Annual Meeting, hands to me and other readers the flags of anthropological pride, the scepters of critical reflections, the battles to be fought, the prizes to be won, the ideals to be aspired:

It is our hope that 2001 session organizers will explore **emergent histories** and **multiple trajectories** of the discipline, **origin stories** (births, deaths and rebirths), **innovation and invention**, and **multiple movements within the field**. Sessions might examine anthropologists' **changing relationship to our informants**, the **emergence of human rights as anthropological concern**, ongoing **dialogues between humanistic and scientific points of view within anthropology** and the emergence of **new theoretical frameworks**. Additional panels could address the **hidden histories** of women and people of color, **disciplinary reframing of categories**, **shifting notions of culture, race and gender**, **methodological transformations**, the history of **anthropology's clandestine involvement** in intelligence activities, and **new approaches** toward understanding the **colonial enterprise**. In effect, we would like to explore **the changing nature of the anthropological enterprise** as theorized and practiced over the last century..

(Ragoné, 2001) (bold emphasis added)

So here we have it all summarized, in “an unique opportunity to explore the contributions of our discipline as well as the controversies within it,” and “an occasion to foreground the critically important historical role played by anthropologists in preserving and honoring cultural diversity, and an opportunity to examine our failures.” The struggle over our anthropological identity and the challenge of defining ourselves in a disciplinary manner (“Discipline: a particular course of instruction to disciples”; Oxford English dictionary). A critical historical role, exemplified within one small sub-specialization of anthropology, made by a discipline that claims to be the “most holistic discipline that studies mankind” (Balee, 1996). I can not but stop to pause, breath, stretch, and daze in cognitive confusion: “histories”, “multiple trajectories”, “origin stories”, “movements”, “emergence”, “dialogues”, “reframing”, shifting notions”, changing nature”, clandestine involvement, methodological transformations”, “new approaches to understanding”. The uncomfortable coincidence strikes me that this email appears in front of me just when I was engaging in concluding that most if not all of the anthropology readings I have read in graduate school so far, in courses required for me to get “training in the historical and conceptual foundations of the field” (Farquhar et al., 2001), deals with this exact same reflexive problem—who are we?—of our own “disciplinary” identity as a professional field. So many “opportunities” I have had to explore the important contributions of our discipline through the texts of important people, and so many more other (less?) important people who subtly evoked the same self-reflexive message of anthropology as a model for cultural critique (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). In a moment of unfamiliarity, I catch myself wondering what it is that has been happening to me, to my thoughts, to my perspectives, conveyed and brought to me, the willing—if not paying—recipient of

wisdom, all this time. In my conclusion I seemed to have lost sight of the instructions disciplined on me, and wonder if anthropology itself has not developed to be foremost an **act of modeling**, as in a lived debate in which the reality of experience is engaged morally. But, if it is a model we are striving for, then for what? “How unfashionable to talk about models,” I convince myself quickly, since models are generally perceived as “bad”, “reductionist”, “determinative”, “absolutist.” But does anthropology “describe” a model, or “is” it what it describes: a model? Ethnographic critiques—perhaps the biggest historical common denominator in cultural anthropology today—surely have taught us that the ethnographer when describing the “other” is a limited human being (a “cognitive cripple,” as psychologists like to call it); engaged, participative, biased, and stuck in object-subject relationships (Fabian, 1983; Latour 1993). And if our model is that of holism—as claimed by many—then when do we know we have attained a conclusion? Have we not learned from the Boasian mistake? When the whole is more than the sum of the parts, holism can not be understood by the separate parts, making our attempts to model or even define it as futile as trying to get the asymptote to reach the axis, or the fractal to stop dividing itself.

If perceived as a never finished act, then we must be engaged in modeling it because of the act of modeling itself. And judging from my own experience and the scanty evidence in my email box that triggered this tirade, the anthropological praxis seems indeed to have become an endless and tireless organized debate. A debate which by itself symbolized and expresses “what it means to be a psychological person” with the experience of “what it means to be in a physical and cultural reality”, back and forth, changed and reformulated, feeding on the never completeness of the exercise until the

end of times. And if anthropology is best characterized as an act, this act is sustained through the quest for defining the field's importance and purpose, speaking in tones similar to ancient philosophers like Lao Tze. An act, debate, praxis, or quest that has becomes cyclically stuck in redefining a imagined hierarchy of mirror images, a feedback on the feedback, an infinite dialectic discussion of possible models of infinite realities, an obsessive preoccupation of trying to “reflect on that which reflects on us”.

Is it this cyclical nature of the anthropological praxis that makes it so intellectually intriguing? Is it this—the act—what has come to define what we do? William Balee, in his “Greening the college curriculum” prides anthropology as highly appropriate for decoding and explaining complex chains of mutual causation in human-environment relationships, while beefing up as the supportive argument a four-field approach that creates a holistic discipline, firmly grounded in sociocultural, archaeological, physical, and linguistic experience. But because Balee is human too, bound by his own mindful mental models, he nevertheless can't help but to filter out one of the four mentioned perspectives as more relevant to contemporary biocultural and environmental crises, “because sociocultural anthropology encompasses the scientific study of contemporary human cultures and societies” (Balee, 1996:25). Then, after having struggled to one layer of perspective, he enters another scale of infinite descriptive constellations of human-environment relationships that dabbles in the nexus of “environmental anthropology.” Here, he specifically argues on behave of four different theoretically important perspectives and their organizational forms through which environmental anthropology—“or human ecology”—can best understood: cultural

ecology, sociobiology, ethnoecology, historical ecology¹. Choosing these preferred four, he ignores the possible realities of what we have called political ecology, evolutionary ecology, systems ecology, restoration ecology, paleoecology, aquatic ecology, wildlife ecology, theoretical ecology, landscape ecology, dental ecology, microecology, urban ecology, applied ecology, and many more sparkles of human imagination as they have expressed themselves in the “past 100 years.” Indeed, he necessarily leaves plenty of room for those that ally or have allied themselves with the non-defined alternative perspectives to continue the infinite debate on behalf of the moral quest of holism. In fact, Balee is doing his anthropological job well, redefining, renegotiating, and repositioning (how many metaphors have we not yet learned?) heuristical categories of moral reasoning through which human reality can be understood. Indeed, it is the heuristical value that counts, and not the model itself.

This act of holistically modeling human experience has long been claimed as the cornerstone of American anthropologists, a population of people which I have joined and who appropriated me in their infinite debate by sending the email referred above. Supported by our own historical and political rationalizations, we—the disciples—have enslaved ourselves to the idea that the ideal of an ultimate model of moral holism is what grants us the epistemological privilege of our language. A language which is one that has historically developed to the point where in social-cultural discourse analysis we are now facing the reflection of the reflection of ourselves (not to even mention the reflections that had already been reflected upon before we got to that point). And this same historical context that created this language is one that has also produced archaeological

¹Psychologists argue that short-term memory works in maximal chunks of seven categories, so I wonder why the four keeps on coming back to us and not a seven.

anthropologists who digitally simulate past landscapes and biological anthropologists who reconstruct the DNA of our evolutionary forefathers. The act of modeling the possible diversity of our own experience explains itself in a complex debate of jargons (meshwork?) that in its constant negotiation symbolizes the holistic model itself, again, like the Tao of Reality of Lao Tzu. And we continue to refine this political language, in an historical debate, battling to publicly define and express a human identity, one able to point out the diversities and biases of human kind in an ethically engaged understanding of what is perceived as right or wrong. While sociologists or economists try to refine models that capture objective data, anthropologists sensitively and cyclically undermine their own modeling efforts in a dialectical process of reflection on their own and others assumptions. It is an unavoidably repetitive process, one that grants privilege to process over product, act over model.

The expression of this act of modeling is not merely in the form of a academic jargon or textual language, but also has identified itself in artistic and political ways. Its organizational form works its way through Latourian networks of people who share membership to an organized and politicized population and, who somehow in their personal life ended up having a core interest in the double(?) reflexivity and have found a subsistence means based on “methodologies” with which to extract and probe new, “acting” models. In its organizational expression, the double reflexivity is expressed in the way the American ideal of the holistic model has modeled itself through the anthropologists’ own understanding of the experience of people. The cultural idiosyncrasy of this political landscape, confounding political pressures with historical rationalizations, is revealed historically. Patterson pretty much exemplifies this point by

“rationalizing” the historical emergence of the idea of a four-field approach as a defense of the anthropological act of modeling, on behalf of the carriers, so as to avoid being manipulated as a tool of indoctrination, subdued in a hegemony of state controls, and politically marginalized in an academic debate on territorialization in the face of a greedy corporate management philosophy (Patterson, XXXX):

“It would also be a call to participate honestly and with integrity in the construction of a genuine politics that challenges a social order which has entrenched racism, sexism, oppression, and exploitation as integral aspects of everyday life and uses the meta-narrative in an increasingly unstable and globalized society... Such a politics must be dialectical and dialogical not absolutist.”

The morality of the argument remains central to the act, here a “construction of a genuine politics.”

I also believe that the centrality of the act in the discipline is becoming increasingly clear. Influenced by theorists like Bourdieu and practically encountered in ethnographic critiques, many now seem to have become aware of the participatory nature of anthropology and science in general, calling for a post-normal science (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1994). For example, in Ragoné’s call for papers a heavy emphasis is laid on the act of debate about the papers to be presented:

In response to a 1999 meeting evaluation survey, the following recommendations were made: that panels be structured to **include more discussion**, that sessions devote **less time to formal presentation**, and

that **discussion be interspersed throughout sessions** (rather than, as it is typically done, merely at the end of a session). This past year we encouraged the organizers of presidential, executive and public policy panels to **incorporate** these recommendations. As a result we saw many **more creatively structured panels**. For 2001 sessions, we would like to encourage session organizers to once again **experiment** with the structure of their sessions in any way that they think will **improve** them, e.g., 3 papers/1 discussant, 3 papers/3 discussants, shorter sessions, or sessions that allow **more time for audience participation**. We encourage organizers to submit proposals and papers that will **create bridges between subjects and subfields, moving us beyond traditionally conceived categories** (Ragoné, 2001) (emphasis in bold added).

Indeed, if the unattainable ideal of the holistic model is expressed in the act of modeling, then emphasis on the act becomes more central to the anthropological discipline than the model. When the 2001 meeting provides us with a “forum to **engage with one another** and with the **public** in a **collaborative** and **creative process**,” it is the process that is emphasized, and not the four-field model. In fact, the four-field model itself opens up as subject of anthropological inquiry: why did it develop here, now, and amongst us? To still insist in the attempt to define our discipline in terms of an overarching hierarchy, as in the taxonomy of the four overarching fields, is the same as reinforcing the modernist paradigm, while bypassing a more complex, hybrid reality.

The expression of four-fields in the act of modeling I regard as an “historical ecology”—taking ecology to mean a hybrid network of nature/culture or object/subject relationships—firmly tight to an American pragmatic philosophy. It took me three hours

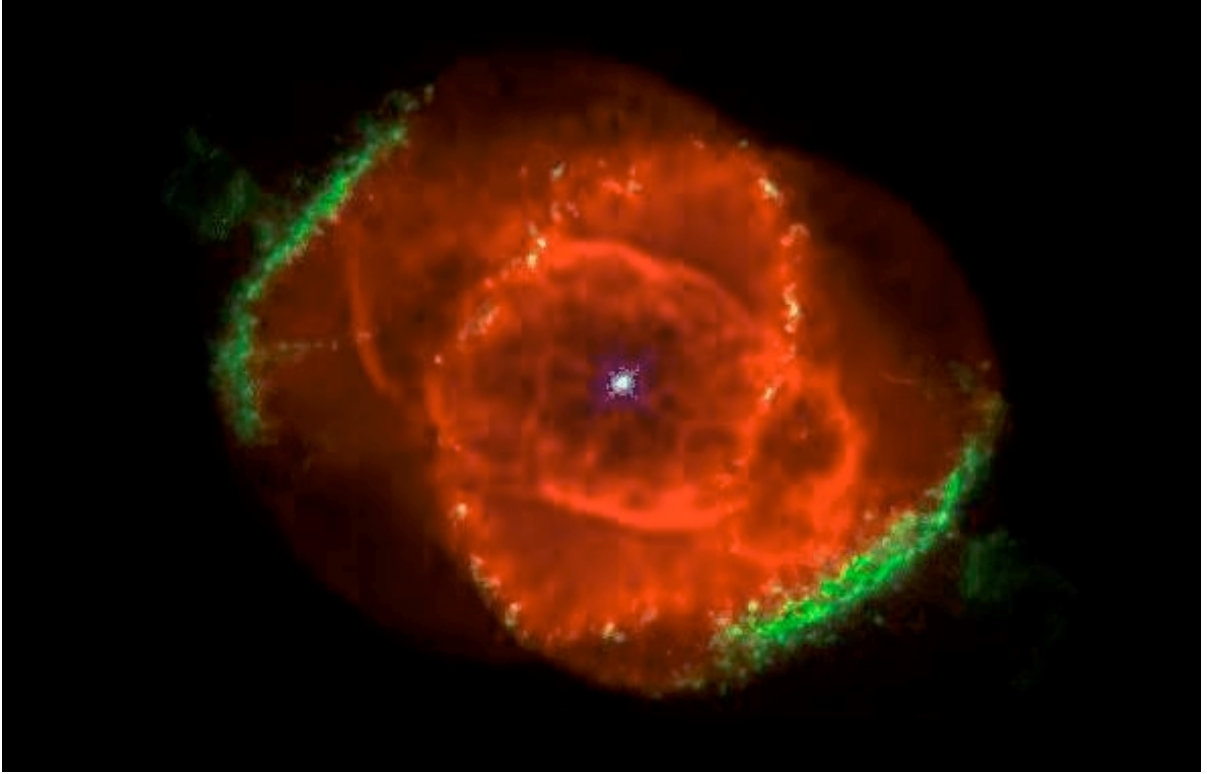
searching libraries and internet sites in the Netherlands to find out that there is not much explicit reference to “four-fields” as the cornerstone of the human experience. I gave up on it, frustrated and dazzled by the idea that my European, ancestral colleges did not perceive this construction to be the obvious organizational form². This in addition to the suspicious neglect of comparative arguments on behalf of most of the discussants in the 1992-93 series on the Four Fields (Myth or Reality?) in the Anthropology Newsletter. One remarkable exception comes from William Adams—an historical anthropologist—who argues that 1) the problem of “myth or reality of the four fields” is limited to North American anthropology, 2) the traditional subfields do not and never did up to a logically coherent whole, and 3) the traditional subfields are not specialties that have split away from an originally unified core, for there never was such a thing (Adams, 1993:27). The unifying force behind the four fields, Adams suggest, is that the “in their different way, they all contributed to an understanding of human evolution, which for forty years was our discipline’s only paradigm.”

In the same series, Keyes notes that “perhaps the four-field framework is partly myth, but insofar as it promotes communication between our various specialties and encourages interdisciplinary orientation, it can be seen as a strength.” (1993:27). I believe that when the strength is the act of process and the weakness the model itself, then the static position of “four fields” seems hopelessly historic already. When the human experience is dealing with the structuring effects of everything from physics, biology, chemistry, philosophy, theology, and psychology to prisons, electronics, cars, huts, groups, clans, families, chewing gum, and stellar galaxies, then how do we sample from

² And I unfortunately could not gain access to Maurice Godelier’s “American Anthropology as seen from France” published in the British “Anthropology Today”

this complex array of subject/objects categories that baseline model which accurately describe the human experience? How can we do so without challenging the idea that systems are heterarchical in the first place?³ I think Anthropology can not anymore be seen separate from any other discipline if it wants to “be” that process which concerns the (moral) act of modeling holism, since holism itself is created and modified constantly by all “disciplines” and human organizations. Still, while the four (or five) fields represent an intellectual hierarchy, an abstracted, simplified representation of reality, these four fields are the form in which the moral act has expressed itself, as a temporary product of the American struggle with its past, trying to come to terms with itself. An infinite reflexivity guided by ever changing fields of attraction.

³ Complex systems in which elements have the potential of being unranked (relative to other elements) or ranked in a number of ways, depending on systemic requirements (Crumley, 1994)



References Cited

- Adams, William Y. (1993) Four-Field Anthropology, The Historical Background. In: *Anthropology Newsletter*, January 1993.
- Balee, William (1996). Anthropology. In: *Greening the college curriculum: A Guide to Environmental teaching in the Liberal Arts*. Eds. Collert and Karakashina. Island Press. Washington D.C.
- Crumley, Carole (1994) Historical Ecology: a multidimensional orientation. In: *Historical Ecology: cultural knowledge and changing landscapes*. Ed. Carole L. Crumley. School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, New Mexico.
- Fabian, Johannes (1983) *Time and the Other*. Columbia University Press
- Heléna Ragoné (2001) "100 Years of Anthropology: The Transformation of a Discipline." Executive Program Chair for the 2001 AAA Annual Meeting
- Grace Keyes, (1993) The Barbarism of specialization. In: *Anthropology Newsletter*, April 1993.
- Patterson, () The Political Economy of the "Four Field" debates.
- Lao Tzu (400 B.C.) The Tao of Reality.
- Latour, Bruno (1993). *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead.
- James Clifford, James and Marcus, George (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*
- Farquhar, J. De la Cadena, M., Dionne, P. , Kakaliouras, A., Scarry, M and Winterhalder, B. (2001). *Report Of the Committee to Review the Graduate Core Course*

Sequence. Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina. January 6,
2001

Funktowicz, S.O., Ravetz, J.R (1994) The worth of a songbird: ecological economics as a
post normal science. In *Ecological Economics*, 10(1994) 197-207.