# KEY DEBATES IN
# ANTHROPOLOGY

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# Key Debates in Anthropology

Every year, leading social anthropologists meet in Manchester to debate a motion at the heart of current theoretical developments in their subject. *Key Debates in Anthropology* collects together the first six of these debates, spanning the period from 1988 to 1993. For each debate there are four principal speakers: one to propose the motion, another to oppose it, and two seconders. These debates give unprecedented insight into the process of anthropological theory in the making, as the many contributors both engage with each other's positions and respond to wider intellectual currents of the time.

The first debate addresses the disciplinary character of social anthropology: can it be regarded as a science, and if so, is it able to establish general propositions about human culture and social life? The second examines the concept of society, in relation to such terms as individual, community, nation and state. In the third debate the spotlight is turned on the concept of culture, and on the role of culture in people's perception of their environments. The fourth debate focuses on the place of language in the formation of culture, highlighting the problematic distinction between verbal and non-verbal communication. The fifth takes up the question of how we view the past in relation to the present, touching on the difference between history and memory. Finally, in the sixth debate, the concern is with the cross-cultural applicability of the concept of aesthetics. Can there be an anthropology of aesthetics, or is the term so wedded to Western standards of evaluation as to make any such endeavour hopelessly ethnocentric?

With its unique format, *Key Debates in Anthropology* addresses issues that are currently at the top of the theoretical agenda, and registers the pulse of contemporary thinking in social anthropology. The presentations, by leading anthropologists of both older and younger generations, are clear, original and provocative.

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# Preface

In any academic discipline, the intensity of debate concerning its theoretical and intellectual foundations is a good measure of its current vitality. Ten years ago, I had the feeling that if the pulse of my own discipline, of social anthropology, had been measured by this criterion, it would have been found to be virtually moribund. I had no idea, at the time, whether my feeling was widely shared, or whether it was a symptom of a purely personal frustration. But three things worried me in particular. The first was that the subject was becoming fragmented into narrow specialisms whose practitioners, while they might converse among themselves, seemed to have less and less to say to colleagues in other fields. Second, after a decade in which virtually no new appointments had been made to departments of anthropology in British universities, the discipline – at least on this side of the Atlantic – was being starved of new ideas. The so-called 'younger generation', myself included, seemed to be growing older all the while, without ever being replaced. Third, I was concerned about the widening gap between anthropology as it was practised and the way the discipline was being publicly presented and taught to students. Why should it be supposed that all the great debates of anthropology, the debates from which the discipline draws its substance and its identity, took place in the ever more distant past? Was nothing of equal significance going on in contemporary work? Why were anthropologists not at the forefront of public and academic debate on the great issues of the day?

It was with these concerns in mind that, in May 1987, I wrote to a number of colleagues, all of them established academic anthropologists in British university departments, to find out whether they shared my feeling of despondency and, if so, whether there might be something to be said for establishing a forum in the UK for the regular discussion of topical issues in anthropological theory. Their responses varied. Some took exception to my assessment of the state of the discipline. In reality,

they argued, there was plenty of exciting and innovative work going on. Indeed, in view of the strains under which the entire university system was labouring, British social anthropology had not been doing so badly, though admittedly much could still be done to raise the public profile of the discipline, and in particular to counter the tendency – which still persists in North America and to some extent in continental Europe – to identify British anthropology with the era of Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard, as though nothing had happened since. Others, however, concurred with my judgement and expressed strong support for the proposal to set up some kind of 'Group for Anthropological Theory'. Overall, the responses were sufficiently positive to encourage me to go ahead with it. A meeting was arranged in Manchester to launch the group, and was intended to take the form of a round-table discussion on the theme: 'What are theories in anthropology and why do we need them?'

The meeting, held in January 1988, was a flop. For one reason and another, hardly anyone came. Nevertheless, it produced one good idea. This was a suggestion that we should hold a major annual event, open to all, in which a motion bearing centrally on concerns in current anthropology would be formally debated. A leading anthropologist would be invited to propose the motion, and another to oppose it. The opening addresses would be followed by a free debate from the floor, a summing-up by each side, and finally a vote. We thought that such an event, apart from being a lot of fun, would generate much serious discussion, and would help to focus attention on issues at the heart of our work. It would make a refreshing change from the standard format for academic events of the 'distinguished lecture' type, which involve minimal audience participation and where debate, if any, follows only years later, after publication.

It was with this suggestion that the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory (GDAT) was born. In highlighting the element of debate, the intention was to stress the importance not so much of constructing theories as of arguing theoretically. The significance of this distinction is a matter to which I turn in the general introduction; suffice it to say at this point that the Group was not to become associated with any particular tendency or 'school of thought'. Rather, its purpose was to promote a continuing dialogue between the many and divergent viewpoints that make up contemporary anthropology. For then, as now, it is in this dialogue and not in any contrived theoretical consensus that the unity of the subject resides. Moreover, there is good reason to believe that theory in anthropology consists not in some separate corpus of propositions about the social world, but rather in the practices of

persuasion through which each of us seeks to draw the other's way of attending to, or engaging with, that world along the same paths as our own. Debate, in short, is the very *modus vivendi* of theory. And theory, since it is about how we engage with the world and not just about how we represent it, is inherently political.

The first debate to be staged by GDAT took place in Manchester on 29 October 1988, before an audience of more than seventy individuals drawn from eighteen institutions around the UK. It was, by all accounts, a successful and enjoyable occasion. The second debate, a year later, drew an even larger crowd. The annual GDAT debate has now become an established fixture in the calendar of anthropological events in the UK. The debates continue to be held in Manchester, and to be closely associated with Manchester University's Department of Social Anthropology. Attendance has varied from a low of around 60 to a high of over 120, but there has been a tendency, over the years, for the proportion of students to faculty in the audience to increase. One reason for this trend may lie in the policy, adopted by the Group, of publishing the proceedings of each debate in the form of a separate booklet. Established faculty preferred, perhaps, to stay at home and read about it afterwards!

Six consecutive debates were held in the years 1988 to 1993. The published versions of these debates, reproduced with minor editorial amendments in the order in which they took place, make up this book. In 1994 there was no debate, partly because the energies of everyone, in that year, had been taken up with the nationwide review, by the Higher Education Funding Council, of the quality of teaching in social anthropology. A new series of debates was inaugurated in 1995, under the direction of the present chairman of GDAT, Peter Wade. There is every indication that the debates continue to fulfil a need in British anthropology for a regular forum for the discussion of leading theoretical issues; moreover, there are signs that the model established by GDAT is being taken up elsewhere, both inside and outside of anthropology. As far as I know, however, a volume of this kind, consisting of a collection of such debates, is quite without parallel. It represents a new departure in anthropological publishing, one that – for the first time – gives due recognition to the contemporary understanding of anthropology (some would prefer to call it 'post-modern') as a polyphonic texture of multiple voices, each responding critically to the others and reacting to changes in the world around them. Anthropology, after all, is not some kind of Durkheimian super-organism with a life of its own, over and above those of its individual contributors. It is, rather, the name of a conversation in which all of us are engaged – professionals, students, not to mention the countless

individuals who assist with our inquiries in the field – and which turns around the conditions of human life in the world.

As for my earlier despondency about the moribund state of British social anthropology, this has all but melted away. I would like to think that GDAT has played some small part in the reinvigoration of the discipline that has undoubtedly taken place over the last few years. But there are other significant factors. There are more jobs in university departments of anthropology, albeit less secure ones. A new generation of anthropologists, equipped with a degree of theoretical sophistication and field expertise that would put many of their seniors to shame, is making its mark. The great figures of the past are still there in our collective memory, but they no longer cast such a shadow over present work. And after a period of rather introverted self-reflection, which was perhaps necessary and inevitable with the collapse of the certainties of modernism, anthropologists seem to have regained some confidence in their ability to draw on the meagre resources at their disposal to tackle some of the great questions that presently confront human life.

It remains for me to thank the very many individuals and organizations that made the debates, and hence also this book, possible. The Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory has been supported throughout, both financially and in other practical ways, by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth, to which the Group is formally affiliated. In the first two years, the debates were additionally sponsored by the Royal Anthropological Institute, which provided a grant from the William Campbell Root Fund. The University of Manchester has generously made available the Muriel Stott Centre, in the John Rylands University Library, for each annual debate, and the support of the University Librarian, as well as of the Library's technical and portering staff, is gratefully acknowledged. Special thanks are due to the successive secretaries of GDAT – Nigel Rapport (1988–9), Matthew McKeown (1990) and Jackie Taylor (1991–3) – all of whom put a great deal of work into organizing the debates, as well as in otherwise managing the affairs of the Group. The 1993 debate was organized by James F. Weiner, who took over as chairman of GDAT for the year 1993–4, prior to his departure to Australia. He was responsible for much of the initial editorial work in bringing this debate to its published form. Over the years, Patti Peach has put in many hours of thankless labour in transcribing the tapes of the debates, and Jean Monastiriotis, Steven Sharples and Karen Egan have all had a hand in typing up various drafts. Gustaaf Houtman and Dominique Remars did a wonderful job in converting the typescripts into camera-ready copy.

Most of all, I should like to take this opportunity to thank all those

who submitted to having their arms twisted to perform as principal speakers in the debates – no doubt in many cases against their better judgement. Their co-operation in providing texts of their contributions, and in the subsequent editing, has been much appreciated. Last but not least, I want to thank everyone who attended the debates, and especially those who contributed to the discussion. It is of course due to their participation that the debates were so successful. Many will find their comments in discussion recorded here, though perhaps in a form so heavily edited as to be barely recognizable. I can only hope that they will not be too dismayed, and perhaps even pleasantly surprised, by the result.

*Tim Ingold*
*Manchester, April 1996*

# Contents

# General introduction

*Tim Ingold*

## THE NATURE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

Anthropology is at once the most resolutely academic and the most fiercely anti-academic of disciplines. Its commitment is to human understanding of a very fundamental kind, and it continues to exist and thrive only thanks to a university system which – at least in principle, if no longer in practice – is dedicated to the production of knowledge for its own sake. Yet at the same time, anthropologists have been foremost in challenging the claims of academia to deliver authoritative accounts of the manifold ways of the world, along with the implicit ranking of such accounts above those that might be offered by 'ordinary folk' whose powers of observation and reason have supposedly not been cultivated to the same degree. This challenge commonly appears in the form of a critique of the assumptions of so-called 'Western discourse', a discourse founded upon a claim to the supremacy of human reason and whose natural home and breeding ground is the academy. Through the practice and experience of fieldwork, anthropologists have been more inclined to privilege the kinds of knowledge and skill that are generated in the course of people's practical involvements with one another and with their environments, in their everyday lives. The paradox is that by doing so, they are undercutting the intellectual foundations of an organization of knowledge without which anthropology, as a discipline, could not exist.

This paradox manifests itself in countless ways. One would have thought, for example, that having so effectively demonstrated the limited and historically contingent purchase of Western thought and science, and having thoroughly cleansed its own conceptual equipment of so-called Western bias, anthropology could move on to other things. Yet it seems that we are perpetually at it, caught in a groove of disciplinary auto-critique from which it sometimes appears there is no escape. The reason, of course, is that the bias we are so anxious to avoid, and the

conceptual dichotomies that seem to hamstring our thinking, are continually reproduced in our own academic practice. Another manifestation of the paradox lies in the well-known fact that students encountering anthropological writing for the first time find it very difficult to understand, even though the quantity of jargon or specialist terminology is no greater – and probably a great deal less – than in most other academic disciplines. Why should it be so phenomenally hard to write about the stuff of ordinary experience in terms that others can readily comprehend? Novelists and poets often seem to make a better job of it, since they are not bound by the convention that what they write should take the form of definitive, context-independent propositions. They can guide readers into a world of shared experience, rather than seeking to represent it on an abstract, conceptual level. In attempting to convey everyday, local knowledge of an essentially non-propositional form in a decontextualizing language of abstract propositions, anthropologists cannot help but tie themselves in knots. Students quickly grasp the difficulty if asked to write an account of such a routine task as tying shoelaces. The simple knot soon becomes a verbal labyrinth.

A third manifestation of the paradox, which is of prime concern here, has to do with the status of 'theory'. Celebrated as the most advanced products of human reason, theories hold pride of place in the academic pantheon. Theoreticians are ranked above observers, experimentalists and laboratory technicians, much as architecture is ranked above housebuilding, or intellectual over manual labour. All of these rankings are instances of a more profound dichotomy, heavily institutionalized in the Western academy, between *design* and *use*: the first a rational creation of the absolutely new; the second a mechanical execution of pre-existing plans. Thus it seems that theories are made by some for others to apply. Do anthropological theorists, then, design conceptual structures for lower ranking ethnographers (or research students) to carry with them into the field? Is the field merely an empirical testing ground for abstract theory? Most anthropologists would nowadays feel profoundly uncomfortable about such a division of labour. They would point out that their own ways of thinking, far from having been fully constituted in advance and then *applied* to field data, actually continue to grow and take shape within those ongoing dialogues with local people that go by the name of 'fieldwork', and that most so-called 'data' consist of their own experiences of, and reflections on, these dialogues. They might observe that the division between theory and data is just one of those artefacts of academic discourse that gets in the way of a proper understanding of human-lived worlds. Yet at the same time it is assumed that anthropology, like any self-respecting academic discipline, should have its

theory, without which it would cease to have any intellectual coherence, becoming nothing more than an assortment of ethnographic narratives. In what, then, can this 'theory' possibly consist?

The present volume is offered in response to this question. I do not mean that answers can be found *in* the book, as though it were a showcase for the higher products of the anthropological imagination. I would rather suggest that the book be regarded as part of the answer, concrete testimony to the fact that anthropological theory consists, in the first place, not in an inventory of ready-made structures or representations, to be picked up and used as it suits our analytic purposes, but in an *ongoing process of argumentation*. In this sense, theory is an activity, something we do. The problem remains, however, of how to characterize more precisely the nature of this activity. We could begin by distinguishing between two arenas of activity in which most anthropologists are involved, whether serially or in parallel: the field and the academy. It would be fair to say that the settings for theoretical work are normally located in the academic arena; they include conferences, lectures and seminars, as well as the solitary spaces of the library or study. The field, by contrast, is not usually a locus for theoretical dialogue: thus the voices of local or native people do not figure in the exchanges recorded in this book and would certainly be out of place here. Admittedly the distinction is not hard and fast. The settings of academic debate are no more ring-fenced than the settings of fieldwork, and may even overlap to a degree. Both are situated in a social world in which we all participate. It can still be argued, nevertheless, that the kind of work we do in the academy differs fundamentally from the kind we do in the field, along the lines of a contrast between production and collection. According to this argument, the field is a site for the extraction of empirical information ('data') which is then processed by means of conceptual tools ('theory') perfected in the academy.

The point of departure for this volume is a different one. It is that the forms anthropological knowledge takes do not arise *de novo* as the creation of superior academic minds, whence they are handed down for application by the rank and file of researchers and students, but rather emerge and are sustained within the contexts of our mutual, dialogic engagement in social and intellectual life. True, engagements in the field do have a different character and dynamic from dialogues in the academy. But far from the one being extractive and the other productive, both are dialogues through which knowledge is *generated*. The difference is that the contexts of engagement in the field lie in the efforts of ethnographers to learn the skills of action and perception appropriate to particular forms of life, whereas the contexts of academic dialogue are

removed from such practical endeavours and are framed by formal structures of teaching and learning. It is solely within these latter structures, themselves indifferent to what is learned or taught, that skills acquired in the field take on the appearance of *information* – that is, empirical content for the ideal forms of theory.

But in reality, anthropologists enter the arena of theoretical debate with far more than 'data'. They come to it with a set of intuitions, sensibilities and orientations that have been decisively shaped by the field experience. The dialogue in the field, in short, is not just a source of ethnographic facts: for the fieldworker it is also an *education*. By the same token, there is more to anthropological theory than the fashioning of conceptual tools for use in the analysis of data. We should rather understand the process of theory as one in which the education provided by the field experience, or more generally by life, is brought to bear in a systematic interrogation of the foundational terms of Western academic discourse – terms like individual and society, culture and nature, language, art and technology, individuality and personhood, history and memory, equality and inequality, even humanity itself. And the engine that drives the theoretical process is the tension, intrinsic to the anthropological endeavour, between abstract philosophical speculation about what human life *might* be like, and our experience of what life *is* like, for particular people at particular places and times.

To outsiders, particularly perhaps to people accustomed to the ways of natural science, anthropologists seem to spend an inordinate amount of time quibbling about the finer meanings of words, instead of getting on with the job of explaining the data. There is plenty of that in this book. But I want to insist that there is more to such arguments than mere quibbling. For every word carries, compressed within it, a history of past usage, and it is only by unravelling such histories that we can gauge the appropriateness of particular words for current or projected purposes. In general, the meanings of words are shaped within contexts of dialogue, and this is no less true of the contexts of anthropological debate. The debates that make up this volume testify to the attempts of the several participants, educated through their field experience as well as by their formal academic training, to seek out a common vocabulary in which to cast the particularities of this experience, by stretching to the limits (and sometimes beyond) the potentials of an academic discourse which often seems singularly ill-suited to the task. The process of theory, as we read it in these pages, is tantamount to the fashioning of an anthropological language dedicated to establishing the commensurability of radically contrasting forms of knowledge and experience. This is why theory is an activity that we cannot and must not do without. A theory-free