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Thinking about the 'Crisis' in Anthropology¹

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The invitation to give a plenary address to the CASCA Conference gave me reason to think about the state of anthropology in the past and present after working in the discipline for 45 years. I have no great message with which to send you all home stimulated to new heights in anthropology. Nor do I have a brand new paradigm to propose. Rather, I want to offer some words of caution and to suggest that we should adopt a more positive and constructive attitude, building on the real achievements of the past instead of endeavouring to knock them down and replace them with something new.

My thoughts reminded me that ever since I have been an anthropologist, the discipline has been declared, at least by some and often by many, to be in crisis - either continuously or recurrently but always with special gravity at the time of the declaration. And I was reminded of an Irish story, as so often, since I began to do research in Ireland, I find a pertinent story coming to mind.

It was reported that there had been a big fire in one of the old landlord houses some miles from the small town which is our research base. The amount of the damage was not clear although the rumour was that it was extensive. A few days afterwards, it happened that Michael was to deliver cattle feed in

that area and he said that he would go and see for himself. That evening in the pub, he was asked what he had seen. "The whole place is down," he said. "It's all gone: everything." He paused and then added, "The only thing that's left is the roof."

Well, I think that for some anthropologists there is the same feeling: that everything is down. Yet, somehow, the roof, the discipline itself, continues. And just as the roof of that house must have been supported by something fairly solid, so is anthropology. Yet, we have been repeatedly told that anthropology is in crisis, in danger of disintegrating and desperately needing renewal. Let me give you some examples.

Recently I was looking at the 1993 list of candidates for office in the American Anthropological Association. A candidate for the office of president declared: "The discipline now stands at a crossroads" and anthropologists have "the intellectual opportunity to redefine science and humanistic studies for the 21st century." Another candidate for that office referred to "the process of reinventing anthropology" in which the "Board [of AAA] must take the lead to reshape anthropology." A candidate for another office deplored "the loss of moral authority and coherence in the discipline;" and another stated the

need to “begin reflecting more fully on the meaning of our own location in the academy.”²

These kinds of statement are, of course, from aspiring academic politicians and, like most politicians’ statements, are wide open to scepticism, or at least they should be. But there is more to it than that, I think, for clearly and for whatever variety of reasons, some practitioners of anthropology have felt that anthropology is in crisis, needing renewal and re-shaping and/or that it is politic to say so to their colleagues. This is not a new phenomenon, however. Let me give a few examples from the past.

When, in 1947, I first began as a graduate student at the L.S.E., along with other newcomers fresh to the discipline, Raymond Firth welcomed us and told us that he hoped that we would enjoy the intellectual excitement of anthropology. But, he explained, we should not expect to get jobs in anthropology because its future was limited and uncertain. It turned out, of course, that anthropology flourished thereafter in academia: we all got money to do research and then most of us obtained jobs professionally. By the late 1950s, with the increasing criticism of structural-functionalism and the new post-colonial political independence in the countries in which most of us worked, the notion of crisis and potential disintegration returned or was re-emphasised. This despair, for some, reached the point during the furors of the late 1960s that a best-seller was the symposium, *Reinventing Anthropology*. A prevalent notion was that anthropology in the past had failed in so many ways that it was necessary to start again, afresh. Moving on to 1977 and the presidential address to the A.A.A.: it was asserted that there was “an increasing concern with a crisis in anthropology.” The president went on to say that anthropologists have been “variously lectured that we should all have been doing applied anthropology, working for the public, working for the government or promoting the Revolution. We [have been] ... accused of spearheading imperialism, promoting radical insurgency and of wasting time in futile exercises in mental game playing.” (Adams 1977:263) I think that we are still lectured in that way: the message is that anthropology has got it all wrong and needs to start again, and that those who assert this know the new and right way to do it. In 1993, a new book in anthropology is advertised and, presumably to catch attention and to promote sales, the ad notes that the author “asks whether the entire discipline of anthropology may not be about to vanish.”³

These examples are straws in the wind and I am sure that many others can be found. They show a recurrent, almost continuous, feeling that we need to re-invent, re-shape, renew our discipline and that it is necessary to keep pulling the plant up out of the soil in order to check on its roots. Maybe the essential nature of anthropology means that we practitioners live in perpetual crisis, unlike other academic disciplines. From what I know of history or economics, for example, there are plenty of divisive and deep-seated differences and controversies; but there is not the same feeling of despair and danger of disintegration and the need to re-invent. I have no definitive explanation of why this has been so in our own discipline but I can offer a few observations that may be instructive.

First, there is and has been an unfulfilled desire, by some, for an agreed, all-embracing general theory with which we all work together but in our various interests. And there is a misplaced, nostalgic idea that once - perhaps in the rosy days of Boas or Malinowski or whomever your hero is - there was a unified discipline and that there should be and, please god, there will be again when we shall all be certain what we are doing, who we are and where we are going. This is a kind of intellectual millenarianism. In fact, it never was quite like that and it may well never be. As Rabinow and Sullivan pointed out, in their Introduction to *Interpretative Social Science* (1987), no single paradigm exists and the alleged failure to discover one is related to the nature of the human world. That would seem to mean that our very subject matter - human beings and their actions and ideas - produces and necessitates a whole range of paradigms, theories, concepts and methods. Yet in saying that, those authors referred to “crisis” half a dozen times in a few pages; and then they proceeded to promote the message that the interpretation of meaning should be the programme for the future. So, they seemed to say, although there is not a single paradigm, there is at least a single endeavour by which to escape from crisis.

Second, this recurrent notion of crisis is self-serving and ego-boosting for some people. We are familiar with the statements by politicians and would-be statesmen that “this Year,” or “this Decade,” or “this Election” and (heaven help us!) very soon without doubt “this new Century,” is key, crucial and special and, by implication, so are we who live at this period. Particularly special are those who propose to be leaders in dealing with this very special time and its critical problems. There is a kind of

reversal of the old Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times." I fear that some of our colleagues who have proclaimed "crisis" and proposed to lead us out of it, have been acting in similar fashion. And there is always capital to be sought by mounting an attack on the faults and weaknesses of our predecessors: for example, that in practice Malinowski did not live up to his declared field research programme, that Mead was gravely at fault in Samoa or that Evans-Pritchard misunderstood Azande witchcraft. Now, of course, those and all other anthropologists have had inadequacies of methods, of theoretical framework, of conceptual assumption; and that is unavoidable since they, like we today, were human and not gods. Yet there is a strong negative, destructive attitude in the discipline. There seems to be a self-promotion and a promotion of new paradigms by insistence on deprecating the work in anthropology that has been done earlier.

Third, perhaps the feeling of crisis in anthropology is a direct reflection of the instabilities and uncertainties of our own age. Perhaps we impose on our professional work something of what we feel and fear in our own social milieu. Thus, whilst earlier anthropology was excoriated (by Kathleen Gough and others) as the "child of imperialism," we might pause to consider if anthropology has also been the "child of uncertainty."

Fourth, there is increasingly a feeling amongst some anthropologists that non-anthropologists are moving in and taking over: historians, philosophers, litterati, sociologists, biologists. And this links to fears, justified or not, that somehow we have not done well enough to establish our credentials and our place in the world. Well, we probably have not; and that reminds me of a personal experience. A good many years ago, I was invited to join a multi-disciplinary committee that was planning a major research project in a part of Kenya where I had worked earlier. At my first meeting, the chairman (a geographer, I think) stated that already various researchers had been appointed - a soil chemist, a hydrologist, a geographer, a botanist, an entomologist - and now it was hoped to appoint a small mammals expert. I enquired if an anthropologist was to be recruited, since the research territory (some 500 by 150 kilometres in size) was inhabited by more than 100,000 people who, with their livestock, lived off the land. The chairman expressed regret that there just was not enough money in the project to employ an anthropologist. But, he said, the need to study the human beings and their lives was fully

recognised and this would be done by the other specialists when they had time to spare from their own work. Would it not be possible, I suggested, to have an anthropologist who could, in his spare time, carry out research into soils and insects? This notion was received, and rejected, without humour and my facetiousness probably reduced what little influence I had there, although in fact I was at that time the only researcher who had worked in that territory. But it showed me just how small was the authority and prestige of anthropology and it suggested to me why at least some of my colleagues might despair.

Fifth, there is, and especially in North America, a market place and a market-driven economy for ideas, concepts and theories. I am continually struck by the way in which the promotion and selling (including that metaphor itself) of ideas parallels the promotion and selling of commodities in the capitalist market. In that latter market, and through its profit-seeking economy, what went before is alleged to be out-moded, ineffective and inefficient, even rather stupid. It is necessary to modernise, we are told. If you are smart and with it, you will go for the new, the improved, the one that is 17% or "up to 23.5%" better than the previous commodity and the competitors' products. So we get detergents that wash quicker, then cleaner, then whiter, then whiter than white, then brighter than white. And obviously, so the promoters hope, my red socks and blue shirt, once washed whiter than white, must now be washed in something that will make them brighter than white! Well that is the profit-seeking fatuity of modern advertising and merchandising. But unfortunately there is something not altogether unlike this in the academic and intellectual market place as each new theory is promoted with vigour to reject and replace the old and is, in its turn, dismissed and replaced with something new. And each time of replacement is labelled "Crisis" and its proponents as the new leaders. If one is cynical or sceptical enough, it is possible to see how these new leaders reap their profits through academic promotion, salary increases, invitations to conferences and symposia, book sales and the status of guru. Perhaps, then, anthropology should now be seen as the "child of the market place." Indeed, during the last year or so I have overheard or participated in several anthropological conversations in which it was assumed that post-modernism was "over the hill" and the speculation was what would take its place. (My own suggestion was that there would soon be a return to structural-functionalism - but under some entirely new name, of course.)

In all this talk of "crisis" and the allegedly urgent need to re-invent and renew anthropology that has been so prevalent, there has been a double failure amongst practitioners. First, there has been some failure to build sufficiently on the real achievements and insights of anthropologists. There has been too much concentration on the earlier weaknesses and inadequacies, knocking down previous work, re-inventing the wheel, deprecating the aims and efforts of the women and men who have thought and written previously. Quite often, too often, I have found even fairly senior contemporaries (let alone graduate students) condemning earlier anthropologists and demanding new concepts and ideas when, patently, they have not properly read the earlier works which could supply or suggest some of the required "novelties."⁴ To be sure, as intellectuals we need to be critical, taking the wheat from the chaff; but we need (as the old song had it) "to accent the positive" and to learn more seriously from the past. And in this we should always be a little humble about our predecessors and cautious in promoting or merely following the new theory and the new approach. Let us, for heaven's sake, eschew the new merely because it is new. There have, I think, been three, so-called "new ethnographies" in my time as an anthropologist. Even more we should be careful with that which is not only new but is opaque, obscure and therefore too easily taken to be important. (To be brazenly cynical: a sometime assumption has been that, if one has to work so hard and long to decipher what the new leader is saying, then one is committed and there has to be some profitable return in following that lead.)

Secondly, there has been a relative failure in anthropology to take sufficient advantage of the multiple theories, concepts and methods that are available. There has been a too easy involvement in intellectual, internecine fighting: our theory against their outmoded, inadequate, even immoral one. Without doubt, one does get emotionally as well as intellectually involved in one's own pet theory (or that of one's guru), even to the point of assuming it to be the "right one" and others to be "wrong ones." Let us have intellectual argument, of course, but as far as possible let it be positive and creative.

Am I, therefore, advocating a soft, compromising, middle of the road policy which threatens the abandonment of principles and critical thought? I hope not; and most certainly I have my own biases and prejudices. Rather, I am advocating a persisting recognition that equally intelligent and committed

practitioners saw (and see) things differently and had (and have) somewhat different goals in mind. We should never slip into the facile assumption that those differing practitioners were (are) stupid, morally discreditable or hypocritical. There is a variety of models, concepts and methods as well as goals to aim at. We should be glad of the potential richness that this provides in anthropology, rather than bemoaning it and seeking the one true way. There has been, too often, facile throwing around of perjorative epithets by which others are rejected as "merely a positivist" or "only a structuralist." I myself am not a "post-modernist", whatever we take that inane borrowed term to mean in our own discipline. Indeed, I discovered only quite recently that all this time (at least according to Marilyn Strathern) I must have been a "modernist" although, like others, I did not know it. Be that as it may, I believe that I have learned something useful from my readings of the less opaque writings of the "post-modernists" and have been able to help pass it on to students. I also discovered that I had always been to some extent reflexive and dialogical in my research and writing; but probably not enough and it gave me cause to think. I have, I hope, always sought to look for meaning and to be interpretive but, again, probably not perceptively enough.

In all this, we might recall the old story of the blind men perceiving an elephant for the first time, such that each got a different conception of the animal as a result of the particular part of it that he touched. The analogy is imperfect but our subject matter is rather like an elephant (if, often, much less substantial) and we are still blind.

A last story, again from Ireland. Near the town where we are based, stand the ruins of one of the largest, pre-Reformation abbeys in the country. After Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century, it fell into disuse, its lands taken by the king's friends. Automatically, the buildings and the adjoining graveyard became the property of the new Protestant church, as they still remain today although over 95% of the local population is Catholic. A few years ago, permission was given for a Catholic mass to be celebrated in the ruins of the abbey and it was hoped that, at last, local people might be buried in the graveyard there. "Well, Patrick," said an activist to an elderly man who lived quite near the old abbey, "it's possible that you can finish up in that graveyard." "Praise the Lord, if it be so," replied Patrick. "May I live to see the day when I shall be buried there." May I too live to see the day when there is no alleged crisis in our discipline.

A final note. In advocating a positive, constructive use of the existing achievements and thought in anthropology, I do not propose that the past should have authority over us. Rather, I wish to emphasise the availability of past achievements as a reservoir of resources that we can advantageously use now and in the future.

Notes

1. This is, as nearly as possible, a written version of the address I gave from notes, to the CASCA Annual Conference, May 9, 1993. Deliberately, I have attempted to produce this present version as similar as possible to the original oral presentation, rather than as a finished journal article. It was largely composed during a sojourn in the country away from libraries and therefore I give only brief indications of references, although I would, of course, complain if students did likewise in their term papers for me.
2. These quotations are taken from the official list of Candidates supplied to members of the A.A.A. Italics are mine. Of course, candidates also referred to other matters anthropological and not all candidates referred to supposed crisis.

3. Columbia University Press advertising *Beyond Anthropology* by Bernard McGrane. I have not read the book.
4. I have long insisted, in my theory courses, that students read about and discuss evolutionism and structural-functionalism. This is not done in order to promote those earlier paradigms but to ensure that students know what it is that they routinely reject and what they can learn from works written in those modes.

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