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Throughout the history of behavioral studies, theorists, scholars, and other professionals have argued over which faction—structuralists or deconstructionists—was/and was camps on the proverbial Mount Sinai of human understanding. This time-honored debate has propelled the field of anthropology through intermittent periods of both public recognition and reputation, and an epidemic of irrelevant irrelevance to the real world. The opposing epistemologies meet on the battlefields of the academy and daily columns authored by celebrated pundits. Can people really be ushered into convenient categories of generalization as Geertz’s Balinese or Schneider’s American, or does this notion of an abstract culture need to be deconstructed, down to its bare components? Matti Bunzl (2008a) clarifies this dichotomy with a lucid metaphor, simply called swinging the pendulum. The pendulum, which represents the ideological majority of contemporary anthropological thought, swings between the particularists with whom Boas is often categorized, to the seemingly polarized opposite group of universalists. Bunzl feels that although perpetual shifting between these schools of thought is a given, “a bit of a swing” in the direction of the universalists may be necessary to take anthropology into the future and yet at the same time reclaim its public interest and relevance.

Shifting epistemologies have shaped anthropology and additionally given it a unique landscape of multiplicity. This should not be deemed as a point of weakness in the discipline, but rather a foundational notion of reflexivity. One merely needs to contemplate how relevant—a admittedly subjective term—would a scientific discipline be if it exhibited no form of reflexivity. It is difficult to imagine an anthropology that inhibits expanding to new horizons of understanding and diversity. Such was the case when evolutionists like Herbert Spencer and Auguste Comte of the 19th century were used by key scholars such as Max Weber and Franz Boas as a reflexive starting point and springboard for potential new trains of thought (Bunzl 1992). As quickly as Boas confounded segregation theories based on race, like Morton and Knott’s niggerology (Glieder 1966), structurally-minded universalists clamored to find any sort of law that placed all people in a matrix of determinant actions. This took hold in anthropology until yet another swing of the pendulum around the time Geertz was writing ethnography. He proposed to be a pivotal figure in the discipline’s last change of direction, as he was dually interested in the meaning behind the ethnographic representation and yet he still packaged dynamic people into convenient groups dubbed “the Balinese.” Geertz’s landmark collection of work was published in the 1970’s and declared a potential new route in the understanding of human behavior. He drew a clear line in the sand with his now published voice, saying that anthropology was “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz 1973). This positioned the ethnographer in a precarious place, where he/she was now a part of the story itself. As stated earlier, he represents a key milestone of anthropology as he has one foot in the door of deconstructionism and the other in positivism. Perhaps this is the position on the pendulum’s swing where Bunzl would like to see anthropology today.

Some of Geertz’s students, including Steven Tyler, James Clifford, George Marcus, and Renato Rosaldo among others collaborated on a revolutionary work entitled Writing Culture. Like Boas responding to the evolutionists, these students were countering the positivists that preceded them, but were also targeting the elements of Geertz that they found questionable. Definitive explanations of the interpretation and meaning behind cultures were always a possibility with Geertz, but this was a targeted misstep that his students sought to rectify. In his contribution to Writing Culture, Clifford (1988) clarifies that the concrete interpretations that Geertz was constructing were theoretically impossible. One was simply unable to fully capture the severely complex and dynamic nature of man. Writing Culture indeed pushed a seemingly new, yet familiar epistemology into anthropology as a discipline and acts as a charter for this anti-modern or postmodern movement of deconstructionism.

The first generation of Post-Modernists was followed up by a relative few but strident apprentices, namely Lila Abu-Lughod and Dorinne Kondo. The former is arguably the principle antagonist of the culture concept in anthropology today. Carrying on the fear of generalization, she actively speaks out for the removal of the concept in its entirety. There are two reasons for anthropologists to be wary of generalization. The first is that, as part of a professional discourse of “objectivity” and expertise, it is inevitably a language of power. The second problem with generalization derives not from its participation in the authoritative discourses of professionalism but from the effects of homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness (Abu-Lughod 1991).

Additionally, Abu-Lughod stresses that anthropology should begin to visualize “strategies for writing against culture.” Robert Brightman (1995) systematically proves through an analytical work that culture should be replaced per Abu-Lughod and Arjun Appadurai’s recommendations. In commenting about the success of the post-modern movement, the latter of the two scholars stressed that “recent work in anthropology has done much to free us from the shackles of highly localized, boundary-oriented, holistic,primordialist images of cultural form and substance” (Appadurai 1996). To maintain the metaphor, Abu-Lughod argues for a pendulum that is ripped completely away from its joint on the ceiling and thrown in the direction of deconstructionism. Fortunately, having the pendulum always in perpetual motion will protect the discipline through many more cycles of radicalism, and continue to bring more questions to the forefront of anthropology.

The Father of American Anthropology,
Franz Boas

Currently, as Bunzl argues, the pendulum is quite obviously favoring these decon-
structure, so much so that it “is absolutely rampant in sociocultural anthropology” (Bunzl 2003b). For Bunzl, this is impinging on the potential utility that anthropology could have in the public sphere, whereas the post-modernists worry about slipping into national agendas or otherwise that would bring a positivist and progressive theme back to anthropology. As contemporary debates rage over the affects of globalization, anthropology may have considerable moral authority in providing some direction. Pundits and academics argue over the details of what globalization will produce, but all agree that there is an increasing amount of social interaction between vast world populations. This trend fits well with George Marcus (1995) and company regarding a new dynamic of ethnography, which calls for an assimilation of political, economic, and multi-sited studies. This may be important in the long run of anthropology, as attacks from outside the discipline are in need of rebuttal. As anthropologists split hairs over their own direction, radicals like Thomas Friedman and Anthony Giddens are active on the lecture circuit and have a vast influence in public discourse. Giddens (2003) argues that globalization is a fundamental part of the natural progress of mankind. Additionally, he makes an argument against traditionalism and hence has a hand in creating a public opinion of culture and identity in today’s bourgeois, which will arguably have greater impact than anthropology’s relatively mute discussions on the matter. In keeping with Bunzl’s metaphor, John Gray occupies the juxtaposition of the pendulum’s swing. Gray (1998) argues that because free-market capitalism is not the pinnacle of social evolution, it will inherently sustain diversity across political/economic borders, staving off the homogenization that Giddens looks forward to and hence stifles the notion of progress.

Bunzl sheds light on the inherent contradictions that lie in postmodernism and although the movement is commendable, it’s self-righteous dogma stops when it’s non-empirical/positivist core values but up against the calculable sum of observed and recorded negotiations, which are clearly positivist notions. Bunzl plainly describes the contradicting issue in post-modernism in an essay published in American Anthropologist earlier this year: Let me state the core problem as bluntly as I can: contemporary anthropology rejects culture as an essentialized abstraction that betrays the invariable traces of power/knowledge. But it does so to advance a fundamentally empirical claim, namely that what has been interpreted as homogenized culture is really a set of complex negotiations and contestations. Sociocultural anthropology may have rejected a scientific variant of positivism, but it retains, even augments, a more immediate form, one that purports that all empirical phenomena are amenable to observation and description. (Bunzl 2008b).

As Bunzl perceptively elucidates, postmodernist thought claims a divorced status with positivism and it’s link with science yet stresses a need to recognize a seemingly Hobbesian nature, where individuals reign, but actions are calculated and most assuredly have positivist dispositions (Folles 1968). In spite of post-modernism’s jarring affect on anthropology, it has, just as the pendulum swings both ways, cemented a paradigm similar to what Schneider and others brought to the discipline. Both sides go to extremes in relating their story of mankind, and without such, anthropology would not be where it is today. As shown through history, individuals indeed matter, and post-modernism has achieved acuity of this more so than any other faction of the social sciences. Boas (1950) in Anthropology and Modern Life illustrates his personal struggle with this very argument, further demonstrating the eternal necessity of the pendulum. He rejected the scientific variant of positivism, but there still remained a portion of empiricism. Boas knew that all empirical phenomena are indeed amenable to observation and description, hinting at two of the key components of the deconstructionist regime of post-modernism.

As Abu-Lughod and others actively pursue an agenda steeped in deconstructing any grand laws or assumptions regarding human behavior, they have forced some intuitive scholars to go beyond the realm of the culture concept. It has yielded a variety of concepts both directly and indirectly, such as discourse, habitus, hegemony, and others. In contrast with those in the discipline who believe these tactics are pulling the field apart, these new concepts have granted supplemental understanding to the social sciences. As Bunzl laments over anthropology’s relative disappearance in the public sphere, these alternative concepts, the very ones he assumes have kept anthropology in the dark, have contributed to a handful of other disciplines that do have a larger role in the public arena. The structure of the ethnography itself has also been revitalized to include the author as an actor on the stage, a particular stage—that is not just an objective eye with power differential and the ability to disseminate othering data, but a player/actor in the story. Ethnographies have achieved a new style, like that of Kondo, whose prose is not as intimidating as other academic anthropologists and the husband and wife team of Clara Martini-Briggs, and Martin-Briggs (2003) position themselves soundly in the writing as clear activists as they explain what they bring to the study: “Nor does this mean that we see ourselves as neutral observers.” The work is also multi-sited, covering Marisura, sick camps, Tortuga, and other cities in order to more fully illustrate how complex social relations and identity link up to global and natural forces. This work exemplifies how anthropology could ideally be, with a position in the middle of the pendulum’s swing. The ethnography itself becomes a more discursive work, as it speaks not as an authoritative voice from above, but as a participant. The contrasts of older works like Malinowski’s Argonauts of the Western Pacific become fairly transparent when considering the contemporary works previously described. Malinowski (1984), although he travels to a variety of islands within the Kula network, fails to really dive into multi-sited and complex inquiry beyond the Kula. He does exhibit tiny bits of deconstructionism by including pieces of ethnography that

did not fit the typical mold of data, but were included regardless. They are what make reading Malinowski’s five hundred page charter interesting. His personal experiences with chief To’uluwa were fortunately included among the troves of skeletal or logistical data. Additionally, dipping his toe in complexity for a moment, he briefly comments about the goods that could be incorporated into the regional Kula from Murua or Woodlark Island. The works of Malinowski and Briggs/Mantini-Biggs therefore represent interesting contrasts that are not at great temporal distance, but occupy different arcs of the pendulum’s swing.

The term culture has taken its share of abuse through the years. Attempts to make culture illegitimate are not extraordinarily recent. The famed culture concept of which so many anthropology departments have justified Franz Boas’ response to the racist practices of his era by standing the test of time, and thus will continue to serve anthropology through its future, whether it be in the academy, public sphere, or both as it was in the glory days of the greats like Mead and Benedict. Regarding the direction of anthropology – specifically the damaging nature of deconstructionism – postmodernism has added much to the field, and although Abu-Lughod’s prescription to consciously remove culture from anthropological epistemologies is problematic in application, its presence as a potential avenue of theory is considerably helpful to the field. Adding to Bunz’s metaphor of the pendulum, anthropology is innately mobile, swinging from an arm of reflexivity. Yet we stand grateful, for without such opposing paradigms, the pendulum would cease to be drawn to either direction and consequently render both this analogy and the discipline it represents truly dispensable.

WORKS CITED