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Culture, Exchange, and Global Ecology: What Role for Anthropologists?

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The call by Alf Hornborg for a better consideration of the human dimension in the public discussion of global environmental change, networks of production and consumption, and structures of knowledge and power is a welcome contribution to efforts to remove mental barriers and institutional forms of governance that limit transdisciplinary understanding of multifaceted environmental problems and political-economic processes. Hornborg's concern over the limited role anthropologists have played in the mainstream discourse on "our common future" – discussion largely dominated by natural scientists, technologists and economists – is highly relevant and thought-provoking. Equally important is his argument that anthropological analyses of cultural perceptions and symbolic meanings would be crucial for a more holistic understanding of past, present and future concerns with global sustainability issues.

Nevertheless, Hornborg's frustration with the marginalization of anthropological knowledge both in the politics of science and public policy is not especially new. Similar kinds of arguments frequently emerge in anthropological discussion. Paul Sillitoe (1998, 2004), David Mosse (2006), and Veronica Strang (2006), among others, have pointed out the general dismissal of anthropological expertise in multi-disciplinary research teams, in international development projects, and in public debate on pressing environmental and social issues. Interestingly, many geographers, sociologists and political scientists have raised similar kinds of concerns and claims. Peter Dicken (2003: 6), for example, complains of the poor recognition of geographical knowledge in the ongoing discourse on globalization, arguing that "Geography is rather like the small child in the school playground who always gets missed out when the big children are picking teams".

In his critique of natural scientists' narrow understandings of complicated socio-ecological phenomena, Hornborg gives the example of Jared Diamond' bestseller

Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed (2005), in which the success of the European imperialism over the rest of the societies is largely explained by bio-geographical factors. Although Diamond claims in his analysis that Western domination did not arise because of any racial or cultural superiority of Western people, his work has been criticized for strong tones of eco-imperialism and ethnocentrism, not only by anthropologists but also by many other scholars. According to Mark Blumer (2006), for example, Diamond uses the overpopulation and the environmental carrying capacity as the main factors to validate a Eurocentric world history, including "Western rationality". Where Hornborg as an anthropologist remarks that the 15-page index in Diamond's work does not even include the word "culture", political geographers and political historians have criticized Diamond's work especially because of a notable absence of any analysis of changes in political economy and in global power relationships.

In this respect, I agree with Hornborg that for a more comprehensive understanding of human-environment relations, and their changes through history, cultural analysis of systems of meanings is of crucial importance. However, such an analysis is not in itself sufficient. Rather, we need to examine environmental changes as multifaceted arenas of interplay where bio-physical, socio-cultural and political-economic processes mingle together in such complex ways that strict categorizations between the natural and the social become more or less artificial. As carefully demonstrated in recent political-ecological studies, an approach where the "material" and "ideational" dimensions of environmental issues are considered as mutually constitutive can offer a much more complete view of multifaceted environmental changes (Escobar 2008, Gezon and Paulson 2005, Peet et al. 2010). I completely agree with Hornborg that both natural scientists and social scientists have something to learn from each other. A careful combination of bio-physical aspects of environmental change with approaches that capture how people perceive and interpret environmental transformation would allow us to expand in new directions of transdisciplinarity, to generate more nuanced understandings of environmental-social questions, and to provide more equitable solutions to their management (Nygren and Rikoon 2008).

According to Hornborg, part of the problem for the relatively meagre contribution of anthropologists to public debate on all-embracing global questions, may stem from anthropologists' ubiquitous emphasis on ethnographic fieldwork. Hornborg critically wonders whether scientists like ornithologists and chemists will keep the leading role in explanations of human condition, while anthropologists are busy immersing themselves in obscure representations of exotic, local particularities. I agree with Hornborg that it is time for anthropologists to amplify their research arenas and their research interests. However, I do not support his categorization of anthropological projects as either synthesizing, cross-cultural comparisons of various aspects of being human on the one hand or detailed, cultural relativistic descriptions of a given locality on the other. Hornborg's view of ethnographic fieldwork in reference to anthropological analyses of a "given locality out there" is not completely fair. Many of the most prestigious and best-known anthropological studies are, in fact, ethnographic case studies; however, their analysis progresses in a way that explores multi-scale causes and consequences in depth, and probes the hybrid processes and relationships between the local and the global in detail. One is left wondering whether anthropologists still have a passionate attachment to ethnographic fieldwork in exotic communities to the degree that Hornborg suggests. Where, within such a narrow conception of ethnographic research, do we locate the increasing number of anthropological studies on multiculturalism, transnationalism, commodity fetishism, cosmopolitanism, hybrid forms of knowledge, globalization, and multi-sited ethnography of politics and power (e.g. Chernela 2005, Tsing 2005, Walsh 2010)?

Furthermore, I would argue that anthropologists' commitment to in-depth ethnographic methodologies is still one of the crucial standpoints that distinguishes them from many other disciplinary contributors even when working in large interdisciplinary projects. Anthropologists' search for in-depth, comprehensive social data requires intensive engagement with cultural beliefs, values, and practices in a particular context in order to gain a holistic understanding of the subject. As remarked by Strang (2006), this methodology provides an excellent intellectual space for anthropologists to deconstruct and

critique their own beliefs and knowledges, and reflect on them alongside ethnographic comparators in a way “seeing ourselves among others” (Geertz 1983: 16). The resulting theoretical developments that are the leading edge of anthropological research thus incorporate conceptual frames, analytic tools, and forms of knowledge, of different epistemologies and worldviews that travel across cultural boundaries. In my view, these forms of ethnographic engagement and reflection are fundamental for theoretically and socially relevant anthropological research. Even celebrated anthropological synthesizers, such as Lévi-Strauss, Sahlins or Ingold, carried out intensive periods of ethnographic fieldwork before constructing meta-theories of the human condition in different cultures and societies.

Concerning Diamond’s ethnocentric explanations of different societies’ collapses, if Diamond had been in the social sciences, he had probably not have dared to travel roads of such naïve speculation, as sarcastically noted by Blumer (2006). The reason that Diamond either ignored or was not aware of the rich literature in anthropology, human geography, and the political history of hegemonic Western constructions of Southern environmental problems as “narratives of degradation” (Escobar 2008, Forsyth 2003, Neumann 1998), led him to ethnocentric explanations of the causes and consequences of environmental-social changes in different societies. Such a naïveté should not be the goal of respectable anthropological research. This may mean that we will never occupy the limelight of popularity, but then relevance in contemporary public debate is not the best guideline for high-quality anthropological research.

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