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### 21st-Century Anthropology: Global Process and Power: Rhodes House, Oxford, 28-29 June 2007 [conference]

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## 21ST-CENTURY ANTHROPOLOGY: GLOBAL PROCESS AND POWER

*Rhodes House, Oxford, 28-29 June 2007*

The strapline for this conference, organized by Raúl Acosta, Sadaf Rizvi and Ana Santos, was 'Reflections on the relevance of an intellectual discipline to tackle current global conflicts and cultural misunderstandings'. These reflections, as often with a broad subject, lacked a coherent, unifying theme. There were some influential speakers presenting interesting papers, but a lack of clear organization (apart from a lack of coffee, some of us also had sleepless nights with rooms double-booked and failing entry-cards, leaving us out on the street in the middle of the night) and ineffectual chairing of the panels meant that the potentially valuable links between them were not fully realized. Because of this, the conclusions that can be drawn from this conference remain at a general level.

In his keynote address, Thomas Eriksen spoke vividly about the way anthropology could 'renew' itself without abandoning the qualities that have distinguished it. He argued that anthropology deals with the complexity of society, refusing to scale society down to fit a fixed grid (especially since anthropologists now share the same space and time with the societies they study), and that it is only by complicating simplicities – by what Michel Serres called the acknowledgment of the existence of a parasitic noise within human relationships – that anthropology can truly contribute to our understanding of the social world. However, to improve communications with society – and in particular to influence policy-makers and the media – anthropologists need to co-operate with other disciplines, as several other speakers suggested.

This need for interdisciplinarity was highlighted by Gerhard Anders in his paper on World Bank and IMF conditionality. Anders showed that numbers can be normative, pushing institutions or people to act according to certain conditions – as in the case of loan agreements between international financial institutions and sovereign governments. At the same time, this normativity constitutes a condition itself, resulting in a redefinition of the boundary between the parties to the agreement.

Robert Thornton spoke about the usefulness of understanding HIV/AIDS in 'ecological' terms. In South Africa, AIDS cannot be traced back to pre-established categories like gender, age or place; rather, the virus is transmitted inside a social structure which Thornton calls a 'sexual network'. By examining the spread of AIDS as an infection of social structures, an anthropological approach – unlike the individualistic, medical or psychological views – can contribute to a better understanding of the flows of the virus.

David Gellner was also positive about how anthropology and its history of theorizing can contribute to global cultural questions today. Although his presentation, as well as some others, would have made a coherent panel if combined with that of Anders, the organizers of the conference chose to split them up. Many speakers had difficulty keeping to the time limits, choosing often to introduce their subject without reference to the other members of the panel – and the discussion, with some exceptions, tended to be unguided. Thus, after Gellner's presentation, in which he argued that democracy and modernity in Nepal need to be understood as constitutive public performances or 'ritual', there was hardly any time for debate.

Keith Hart presented his paper on the force of money in the making of world society with great coherence and impetus. Referring to Kant and post-Kantian philosophy, he argued that the social organization of impersonal institutions separates public from private life. By reconnecting the 'market', an unbounded and unknowable field of society, with 'home', the known field of the subjectivity, money actualizes the possibility of a meaningful social life. In this way, the world and the self become connected and constitute, for the first time in history, a true world society.

The general conclusion of the conference was along similar lines. An ethnographic approach and historical awareness render anthropology important and valuable, but if anthropologists are to have more influence on policy-makers and the media, they must seek to co-operate with other disciplines without losing their distinctive ways. ●

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