Understanding Anthropological Understanding: for a merological anthropology

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Biographical note

David Zeitlyn is Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Kent, UK where he has worked since 1995 following a series of post doctoral fellowships at the University of Oxford. He has been working with Mambila people in Cameroon since 1985. His work has ranged from spider divination (1990. 'Professor Garfinkel visits the Soothsayers. Ethnomethodology and Mambila Divination', *Man (n.s.)*, 25(4): 654-66.) to a detailed analysis of how families members talk to one another (2005. *Words and Processes in Mambila Kinship: the Theoretical Importance of the Complexity of Everyday Life*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books (Rowman & Littlefield).). A pioneer of the use of the internet to make anthropological data available for research and teaching (see http://era.anthropology.ac.uk/), in recent years he has started working in visual anthropology and is currently working on a large archive of photographs by a Cameroonian photographer (forthcoming 2009. Archiving a Cameroonian Photographic Studio with the help of the British Library 'Endangered Archives Programme'. African Research and Documentation 165).

Abstract

In this paper I argue for a merological anthropology in which ideas of 'partiality' and 'practical adequacy' provide a way out of the impasse of relativism which is implied by post-modernism and the related abandonment of a concern with 'truth'. Ideas such as 'aptness' and 'faithfulness' enable us to re-establish empirical foundations without having to espouse a simple realism which has been rightly criticised. Ideas taken from ethnomethodology, particularly the way we bootstrap from 'practical adequacy' to 'warrants for confidence' point to a merological anthropology in which we recognize that we do not and cannot know everything, but that we can have reasons for being confident in the little we know.

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Keywords

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> Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial committed and incomplete. This point is now widely asserted and resisted at strategic points by those who fear the collapse of clear standards of verification. But once accepted and built into ethnographic art, a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact. Clifford 1986:7

> It seems clear that visual anthropology now urgently needs to consolidate itself within a theoretical framework that reassesses anthropological objectives. A fuller use of the properties of the visual media will entail significant additions to how anthropologists define their ways of knowing, which is to say that categories of anthropological knowledge will have to be seriously rethought, both in relation to science and to the representational systems of film, video and photography. (MacDougall 1997: 286)

> Eliminating simple minded realism does not eliminate all forms of realism, and it does not require either idealism or total relativism. (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 233)

Introduction

Some recent papers in *Anthropological Theory* (e.g. Hastrup 2004 and Csordas 2004) have raised a series of epistemological questions. What is anthropological knowledge? What sorts of evidence do we, should we be addressing? How does evidence contribute to knowledge? On what grounds might we be led to reconsider our position? Rather than accept the postmodern rejection of empiricism as 'positivistic' I shall argue that there is room for an empirically warranted ontology and following this an epistemology (a form of sophisticated realism) in which a recalcitrant world constrains but does not determine what people make of it, in ways in which people (including anthropologists) can comprehend.

Parts/Wholes or from Partial Views to Partiality and Merology

I start with some fundamental questions. What happens if we change our basic vocabulary? What else will change? How does the terrain of anthropology differ once redescribed? Inspirations for this starting point include Marilyn Strathern on parts and wholes (and hence how individuals relate to society, see Strathern 1992a), Tim Ingold on song as the basis for language (1993, 2000) and Alfred Gell on connections between phonetics and landscape (1995).

Tim Ingold has suggested (at least half-seriously) that singing rather than tool making should be seen as the significant step in human evolution.[1] He asks a curious and fascinating question:- what if human language starts with song not speech? If we work on that assumption then some problems vanish and others appear. The conduit metaphor, the communication of information, is no longer an organising principle (if it ever was); rhythm, repetition and syncope emerge as basic organising principles.[2] The combination of music and movement as 'dance' may indeed be a prime candidate for human essence. Some recent theoretical work that started from the detailed analysis of dance provides some intriguing pointers that this is not as far fetched as it may seem at first (Farnell 1999, 2000). Indeed, this provides a new perspective from which to approach some of Maurice Bloch's early work on rhetoric and politics (1975).

The change of perspective is illuminating, it helps reveal the refraction patterns of the analytic terms we are accustomed to using. It helps us to think through the biases implicit in our starting points.

My other examples are Melanesian in origin. Marilyn Strathern has questioned the relationship of individuals to society. She used Melanesian case material as the basis for a re-examination of the Durkheimian axiom that individual people are the atoms of the social universe, the building blocks from which society is composed (this is further discussed below). In a very different way Alfred Gell (1995) upset and disturbed assumptions that are usually never questioned, by raising the possibility of connections between phonetics and landscape (landscape affecting phonology not the other way round). He suggested ways in which the shape of the tongue as it produces particular syllables resembles the shape of the landscape features named by the phonemes concerned. Gell made us question the independence of cultural features such as language in new and provocative ways. Gell is not usually seen as a material determinist but he

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[1] I am conscious that Ingold is mainly arguing against stepwise leaps in evolution. Here I am less concerned with evolutionary theory than in using his argument to explore the effects of changing the initial conceptual metaphors used in anthropological theory making.

[2] It is worth noting that according to the anthropologically inspired 'Darkover' series of science fiction novels of Marion Zimmer Baddley 'to dance is human'.

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would have (I am sure) enjoyed the game or the posture. He would have appreciated that cultural materialists such as Marvin Harris have something to teach us, so that by acting like a materialist one day and a structuralist another we are better able to comprehend and discuss the matter with which we are dealing.

This style of questioning, whether about the fundamental building blocks and their independence from one another, or about the ways that parts and wholes are related, leads to some other questions about anthropology and anthropological theorising, and it is to these that we now turn.

Partiality and Partial views

My question is the following: what if the point of anthropology is not to produce a synoptic view of everything?[3] Anthropological holism not withstanding, what if we accept our limitations and start thinking seriously and positively about partial views, and about incompleteness.[4] This produces a merological[5] anthropology)? At a stroke several concerns slip away: most importantly, rival interpretations no longer directly compete, instead they (potentially) complement one another. Although where they overlap they may compete, most often this is not the case. As a case in point, consider Mark Hobart's condemnation of the discipline in which his career was made. 'The fact that laughter, fear, indeed so much of what people actually do and say, are so successfully eliminated or trivialised in most anthropological writings is a pretty

[3] In this context 'everything' is a weasel word. The argument I construct is couched in the language of epistemology: of the limitations of human knowledge of an independent world. If the ontology is somewhat different, so that rather than thinking of a complete world, independent of human thought, we think of a processual world in a continual state of becoming, then necessarily all human knowledge is, and always will be, incomplete, since the process never finishes.

[4] This is Reyna's approach (1997: 332-4, and 347): his agniological method seeks to identify (and then reduce), our ignorance, so he urges us to look for gaps and holes. This I note is likely to be humbling for the practitioners.

[5] The term mereology is used in philosophy as a term for the 'formal study of the relations between parts and wholes' (OED2). This is particularly relevant to Durkheimian questions about the relation between individuals and society, and those between persons, body parts and memories (see Chisholm 1979 and Ruben 1983). As I will argue below, merological anthropology is an anthropology which is partial and honest about its partialities. In another context Strathern (1992b: 72, 204) introduces the idea of merographics (partial analogies): 'the issue is the way ideas write or describe one another,; the very act of description makes what is being described a part of something else e.g. the description' (1992b: 204); see also Franklin's recent elaboration (2003). The philosopher John Dilworth

damming indictment of our pretensions to knowledge' (1995: 66). I suggest that this is not an indictment but a humbling reminder of how partial our knowledge is, knowledge which is none the worse for all that. The recognition of incompleteness is not, to my mind, an indictment but rather the following. First: humbling (we do not and can not know everything). Second, it is a necessary consequence of a scientific orientation, or as Hastrup puts it 'knowledge must be *organized* information; in the case of anthropology it concerns the organized information about ways of living in the world and modes of attending to the world. The organization implies that knowledge is both *reductive* and *selective*' (2004: 456 her emphasis). Third, incompleteness leaves room for multiple other accounts so it should underline the way that an anthropological account does not claim exclusivity; it occupies a demarcated domain, the boundaries of which are continually being challenged and shown to have been misunderstood (but this is a symptom of a progressive discipline). We *do* know more than we once did. That makes our lives considerably harder than those of some of our illustrious predecessors. Moreover, different accounts (and tensions between them) may help explain some of the dynamics of social structure. Bateson's original account of Naven (1980) exemplifies this: his subtitle is 'a composite picture of the culture of a New Guinea tribe drawn from three points of view'. Each viewpoint he presents illuminates different aspects of the ritual and Iatmul society yet they are admittedly incomplete in themselves. Finally, mention of dynamics brings us to the temporal dimension (for all that Bateson's account is synchronic). Although I write from an epistemological starting point (as if the problem were imperfect knowledge of a fully defined world), recognizing incompleteness leaves room for other ontologies as well. In particular, it is consistent with a view of the world as processual, or as continually *becoming*.

The word *partial* is ambiguous between being 1) incomplete or 2) biased. As I shall explain below, both meanings are relevant to anthropology. First, consider the following (invented) statements which are typical of much published academic work, anthropology

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also discusses incompleteness and partiality of representations (see e.g. 2003: 221-2).

included:

> The truth about Diana's death is x.
> They said it was like that but what really happened was this...
> Dr W. gives a detailed and accurate account of social life among the Blah.

Even those most enthused by postmodernism do not succeed in escaping from implicit references to truth. A relativist has no reason to complain about *other* peoples' concerns about truthful accounts or accurate representations and should eschew such complaints as misleading or imperialist (in other words, they have no basis for attempting to impose their relativism on realist others without recourse to claims to truth or some other form of implicit realism).

I suggest that anthropologists should aspire to producing faithful[6] accounts, in which the partiality of their accounts are made explicit, and in which the practitioners take steps to reduce that partiality; the recognition that it cannot be completely avoided does not mean that we cannot attempt minimization. The inevitability of bias does not prevent a professional anthropologist seeking to document partiality when it occurs. This applies to both our own partiality and those of our informants. Hence, standard sociological research techniques are helpful, providing warrants for our statements. Following these methods anthropologists are systematic. They do not believe everything they are told, or, rather, they listen to everything everyone tells them and then try and make sense of the conflicts (and the contradictions) between what different people say, and between what people say and what they do.

So we attempt to be faithful, to what we are told and to ourselves, to our professional identities as observers and as social analysts. Unattainable? Yes. Inevitably tainted? Certainly! But 'orientation' is different from 'arrival' or 'achievement'. This connects with the idea of

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[6] I am conscious that the main text defines neither 'faithfulness' nor 'aptness'. An important part of my argument is that such words point to the complexity and entanglement of humans and the world. It is not so much a case of humans knowing the world (simple realism) or of constructing the world they live in (strong relativism), but rather humans from particular cultural backgrounds and for particular purposes making sense of an often recalcitrant world. It is my contention that the questions raised by the ambiguities of words like 'faithfulness' (or 'aptness' as used below) push us in fruitful directions as we try to make sense of and understand the complexity of human social organization (see Reyna (1997: 328ff) on science and objectivity).

'Partial Views' and the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 160) who describe scientific metaphors as being **apt**[7]. The notions of aptness or faithfulness provide ways of evaluating accounts in the face of the available evidence. Aptness is susceptible to empirical testing. The attraction of such an approach, as I see it, is that it assumes that all explanation has a metaphorical component which will be culturally constrained: 'the very notion of the aptness of a metaphorical concept requires an embodied realism. Aptness depends on basic-level experience and upon a realistic body-based understanding of our environment' (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 72-3 see also 228-32). Yet for all these cultural constraints, aptness also provides a link to empiricism: a metaphor may or may not be apt, and we can seek evidence to help us make the judgement.

Somewhat ironically, my point is the same as Clifford's (1986: 7) for all his being one of the most prominent anthropological postmodernists, and hence usually taken as being hostile to empiricism. But his talk of 'representational tact' in the introduction to *Writing Culture (*quoted above) is wholly consistent with the idea of aptness or empirical responsibility.[8] As Brian Morris notes

> 'What knowledge as representation does, however, is to make *explicit* what in fact is being affirmed (truths about the world), and acknowledges that all truth is intersubjective and thus open to critical scrutiny and possible refutation by other scholars (unlike truths which are apparently disclosed through evocation or mystical 'revelation' and which we are told have no reference at all to any world outside the text). With regard to anthropology, this affirmation of truth as representation is particularly important, for ethnographic accounts and anthropological theory should be open to scrutiny by the people whose culture and social life is being described and explicated' (1997: 324).

Anthropology in the streets: Boot-strapping

'Part of the post modernist critique of anthropology has been that its methodology has been based on the double illusion of the neutral observer and the observable social phenomenon'

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[7] See footnote above for definitional issues.

(Banks and Morphy 1997: 13). As has just been discussed, for all its illusory nature, the 'neutral observer' is an ideal worth aspiring to, since it encourages good practice and it makes for work that is more accessible for others to use and criticise. As to the observability of social phenomenon I see this worry as a classic case of taking an inability to run as the basis for denying the possibility of walking. Leaving philosophical and metaphysical questions of the existence of the world aside, at a very crude level, events are observable and patently these events constitute the social worlds we make. Actors observe each other and change their tactics and strategies accordingly. Mundane, everyday lives are full of observable events and interactions between people and objects.

The objects are themselves the subjects of study. One of the ironies of late twentieth century anthropology was that at the same time that being the object of anthropological study was being portrayed as a terrible thing (I paraphrase), there was a resurgence in the study of objects; now with a social life (e.g. ed. Appadurai 1986) or as commodities (e.g. ed. Miller 1997). The irony is that objects emerge as legitimate subjects of study just as humans cease to be so. At times it seems that biological anthropology is in a similar position: it is not, it cannot be, essentially racist to study biological aspects of human society. Yet to talk about different adaptations to local environments over millennia is to court instant rejection as politically unsound. Safer by far to ignore and never consider any question where biology is relevant.

There is an odd distance, disjunction or rupture between what anthropologists are told to do (the methodological and ideological strictures which are handed down to students), and what they and their tellers do in their everyday life. What Husserl called the 'natural attitude' (lifeworld) typifies non-philosophically-sensitive everyday life. By and large, we do *not* question the existence of our children, colleagues, spouses, our cars and bicycles and their mechanics. We behave as if utterances have meaning, which even if not always immediately clear, can be easily clarified. It appears that such rough and ready, albeit philosophically and methodologically

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[8] See Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 134) on 'empirically responsible philosophy'.

naïve, attitudes are pervasive round the planet.[9] In our mundane lives we don't live in a post-modern world. We live in a modern one (or amodern following Latour 1993). To these prosaic (but in the light of contemporary theory, bizarrely radical) claims I wish to add one further suggestion: that human actors in their everyday life have *anthropological* understandings of the world they live in. In order to be a competent adult social actor a person must gain some fluency in one or more dialects of one or more languages. In so doing they acquire not just a grammar but a social grammar of how the words are to be used and to whom. They must learn how to comport themselves, how to hold their body, which bits to display when and to whom. They must learn which parts can be altered by surgery, the insertion of metal, plastic, silicon gel, or ink and to whom they should admit this to (the list could be continued). The models of understanding that people have of their fellow actors is essentially an anthropological understanding albeit unformalised, often unstated and rarely comparative. If it works on the street why not in academe? The understanding I have of my fellow citizens is imperfect, incomplete (partial), *and* partial to my point of view but it works (more or less). It is adequate for my everyday life, and by achieving that adequacy it passed a kind of test and repeatedly so. The challenge for 21st Century Anthropology as I see it, is to abandon the requirements of completeness and certainty for what, after Strathern (1992a), I call merological anthropology. We should continue to attempt to make explicit the complexity and systematicity, the inconsistency, clarity and vagueness of everyday understandings. The accounts should be merological in that they recognise their own partialities; depending on the rhetoric used such recognition could be described as *either* scientific or post-modern. Anthropological accounts are partial both in that they are incomplete and that they are biased.

Grand illusions: Meaning after the fact. Textures of Meaning

One grand illusion that we should challenge is that we know what we are saying; that we, as

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[9] Hence the reference to boot-strapping in the section title: we pull ourselves up by our boot straps in ways reminiscent of Escher's impossibly circular drawings.

actors have intentions that *are* meanings. I would rather argue that intentions are different from meanings, that the meaning of utterances is an interactional attribute that does *not* precede the utterance and its reception. Intentions (or goals) may be represented in many different ways, usually being inferred after the fact on the basis of actions (which include the production of utterances). Much confusion has been caused by a technological innovation that has become quite widely distributed, especially in recent times: writing. Analysts such as Eisenstein, Ong and Goody[10] have written extensively about the effects of literacy but here I want to focus on a different aspect of how writing presents a misleading model for understanding how meaning is created in ordinary human interaction.

A parallel illusion in economic theory is that of the rational agent, the lonely maximiser. In a chilling article in the *London Review of Books* Donald Mackenzie (2002) reports how ordinary students behave normally (that is *not* according to the norms of economics) except for those 'polluted' by economic theory who actually act according to its precepts. This has terrifying implications since it is the economics graduates who are recruited by important agencies such as the World Bank and IMF, so although economic theory *was* wrong as a model of the activity of human agents it may *come to be* correct as those schooled in its theories become the active agents in the world economy and act as they have been taught is proper.

The grand illusion of philosophy and anthropology alike, is that of the writer, the author with a clear plan of what they want to write. The results may be problematic and in need of interpretation but some are more needy than others (examples abound, ranging from those beloved of speech act theorists 'I bet you', through jokes 'A horse walked into a bar…' to poetry: 'Should lanterns shine the holy face, caught in an octagon of unaccustomed light, would wither and any boy of love look twice before he fell from grace' (Dylan Thomas)). It is a deeply misleading mistake to claim that all texts are the same. All utterances are not equally problematic: the young child whining for food does not pose as complex an interpretative

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[10] See Eisenstein (1979, 1997), Ong (1988) and Goody (1977, 1986, 1987) and Zeitlyn 2001 for an overview. Street (1983) and Finnegan (1988) provide corrections to the more overstated versions of the 'great divide'.

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challenge as, for example, the public relations officer acting for a television celebrity. So too, some social generalisations are much easier to make than others. We can be much more confident that we have, for example, identified the economic basis of a given society than we can be about their attitudes to life after death.

Some authors have proposed 'positioning theory' as an alternative to various candidate theories of the self. Much of the difference between positioning theory and its rivals lies in its abandonment of any attempt at essentialising the sense of self in ways parallel to Strathern's ideas of partiable persona. So Linehan and McCarthy write 'we define ourselves with respect to communities of practice as identity is constructed through negotiation of the meanings of our experience of membership in communities' (2000: 438). Selfhood on this account is not an individual attribute but a social accomplishment. Similarly, I am proposing that meaning lacks any essential core, that words really are as Wittengenstein said they were: what we do with them (and that such actions are not a matter for individuals in isolation: all actions are social actions, see Csordas 2004 and Das 1998). To look beyond, or to feel as if that is inadequate, is a literate illusion, foisted on the intellectual world by authors who mistake the written word for words spoken in conversation (de Certeau 1988). It is less the case that 'in the beginning was the word' than 'in the beginning was the exchange of words'. Meaning is a social achievement not an individual assertion. This has wider implications: Descartes had it wrong, rather than *cogito ergo sum* we should have *disputamus ergo summus*.[11] In his recent reflection on the anthropology of religion, Clifford Geertz called this the 'autonomy of meaning thesis' which he summarized thus:

> Meaning is not a subjective matter, private, personal, 'in the head'. It is a public and social one, something constructed in the flow of life. We traffic in signs *en plain air*, out in the world where the action is; and it is in that trafficking that meaning is made. We must ... 'mean what we say', because it is only by 'saying' (or otherwise behaving, acting, proceeding, conducting ourselves, in an intelligible manner) that we can 'mean' at all. (2005 :6)

Relatedly, although making a different point, Sperber (1982) talks of semi-propositional representations, grammatical expressions that do not have the quite same propositional force as

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[11] In a similar argument Gergen contends that 'we may rightfully replace Descartes's dictum with

others. The propositional force that they may have does *not* depend on the attitude of the speaker but on the reception of their words by their interlocutors. It is not so much that I express my ability to transform into a hippopotamus as what others do with those words. I may say that I am a good farmer, and that I can transform into a hippopotamus. The status of these utterances is determined by whether I am invited to work parties, whether people come to visit me to inspect me for wounds when a hippopotamus is known to be sick or wounded and whether I am accused of trampling fields in hippopotamus form. So the status of these utterances is not determined by what the speaker intends or what by any one listener understands, but by what happens following the utterance. This has profound implications: the status cannot be safely established in advance (except by induction from previous utterings) and it is conditional on the conditions of utterance, the audience and circumstances in which the phrase is uttered. In short, the meaning is determined <u>post hoc</u>, after the event. This, at a stroke, removes or avoids the philosophical topic of 'the problem of meaning' or 'the' problem of meaning (the difference in emphasis points to the possibility of different approaches, and to the possibility of a resolution of the problem).

The ethnomethodological solution to the problem is to abandon the philosophers' quest for certainty, the logicians' quest for decidability, the computational linguists' quest for an algorithm. Instead, in an alarmingly empirical fashion, we examine everyday behaviour and focus on the way that utterances in ordinary, everyday usage are taken to be meaningful. Most of the time most of us succeed in getting our meaning across. If we accept this, and take it as our object of study then we abandon the search for MEANING (as it were in capitals) and examine instead the everyday adequacy of lay understanding. This, of course, is anathema to many philosophers and to some anthropologists. In everyday conversation utterances are satisfactory; they are sufficient to the day. Such 'practical adequacy' for the task at hand provides ample matter for the analyst. The results of this style of analysis are widely applicable, and in particular are germane to the central topics of anthropology. The result is a

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communicamus ergo sum' (1994: viii).

philosophically insubstantial but workaday anthropology. Crucially, it is one that is oriented to the phenomena that surround us in fieldwork. This holds whatever the main focus of field research, be it beer, jiggers (or other health problems), farming, sexual politics, tarot cards, in-vitro fertilisation, virtual reality or whatever currently fashionable topic we may care to choose. For what distinguishes anthropology[12] from other humanities, above all else, is the practice of fieldwork. Unlike the study of literature or history, anthropological research consists, in the main of a series of partial but unceasing conversations, reflections upon them in the light of both what we see to have happened, and what happens next, as well as upon the theory we may glean from books (q.v. Gudeman and Rivera 1990). It is worth noting a further consequence of this is that researcher and research-subject are inextricably connected.

What constitutes an ethnomethodological approach to meaning? It begins with a very Wittgensteinian account of the use of the words at issue. Perhaps, one sees something happen and wishes to find out more. Or one may start with an elicitation frame and try and gather the vocabulary of a particular domain. Then, given the clues that this reveals, one can examine the situations in which those words or phrases are used. Of course, as anthropologists, we may be sensitive to issues about who uses particular words and the social context of their usage. To go further we look for problems, disputes and communicational upsets. We examine the troubles and see how they are resolved. Indeed this takes us from the 60s to the 70s and beyond. For the notion of repairs is central to the ethnomethodological programme (Schegloff 1977, 1992). Meaning is assumed, presumed, taken for granted. We work on that basis until we are given reasons to doubt (such as occur when there is a break in conversation) which leads to our explicitly addressing meaning and understanding. During conversational repairs meaning is publicly negotiated between co-conversants. Following the steps taken to effect repairs, those involved have further grounds for their assumptions, which may not be questioned at the next

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[12] Following Tim Ingold's 2007 Huxley lecture, I should add a caveat to this. Ingold argues strongly for anthropology as a comparative discipline, comparing the results of individual ethnographies. The logic of his argument is that I should say ethnography (rather than anthropology) is distinguished by the practice of fieldwork. However, the experience of undertaking an ethnographic study remains a foundational qualification for professional

conversational round. Those grounds are practically adequate to the task at hand. Meaning is emergent from the morass of social activity and, in particular, it may be examined when problems occur. So anthropologists really are, or should be, looking for trouble. Not just the extreme areas of asking 'what do you mean' but the points where disputes arise about the correct course of a ritual, or who should inherit a particular field or cows. Trouble spots are points at which meaning is at issue. The result, the resolution of the problem is some sort of (more or less temporary) consensus, a means of proceeding, even if it is nothing more than an agreement to disagree.

From this perspective meaning is an emergent phenomena of social interaction. On this view it is not located in our heads but in socially constructed space, in the interactions of social actors, of people (see Geertz 2005 quotes above). More importantly, it serves to orient our research practice to troublesome but mundane interaction but now we can see why it has been so productive. To take an example from the study of ritual, consider Gilbert Lewis's (1986) transcript from a recording made during the construction of part of the Gnau *Panu'et* ritual. The recording documents dissent about how the rite should be conducted. Through Lewis's analysis the conflicting voices give substance to our understanding of the rite and its meaning. Another example, in a more mundane setting, concerns the neighbouring farmers, Sid and Doris as discussed by Nigel Rapport (1983). Rapport portrays them as constructing their relationship as they go about their everyday business. On my view, the anthropologist is handicapped by having less evidence to work on than the participants, but it is evidence *of the same kind* as used by Sid and Doris in constructing their representations of each other. The anthropologist has neither analytic nor authorial priority and the possibility of criticism is reintroduced if enough material is published.

Much human interaction is unproblematic and not discussed. This can pose problems for

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anthropologists and this justifies the distinction as stated.

analysts since it is never unambiguously clear what was meant or achieved.[13] Hence, our concern for smaller or larger troublespots where conflicting voices may give substance to our understanding. Troublespots, disputes and arguments are among the places where 'the everyday' and 'practical adequacy' diverge. In mundane, unproblematic life the terms cover the same ground in which children are fed and raised, crops grown, livelihoods achieved. Arguments reveal discrepancies between the understandings of the different parties about what is going on. Resolution marks an agreement (often tacit, and temporary) of a common workable understanding. It must be workable in order to let people keep working at their shared social lives.[14] Disputes set limits for the possible interpretations of the case in point[15] and demonstrate in public the evolution of the interpretation that was achieved. Life goes on and this includes the talk and arguments that are part of it. The interpretations in question are first and foremost local, and may never be stated in words. They may also be those of an academic anthropologist, striving to make explicit the range of options within which social actions occur. This is what makes anthropological descriptions *thick* (in Ryle's sense (1971) as adopted later by Geertz): not just the action but the way in which it is understood locally.

This is to suggest that all utterances have degrees of illocutionary force, but the assessment of their power cannot be done in advance. This is easiest to see in arguments in court, where the parties involved are trying to convince those hearing the case that they should prevail. In the course of an argument many statements are made, most of which are never pursued and whose status is never established. Afterwards only the analyst really cares about these 'loose ends'. The usual state of affairs is that the world is constituted by a mass of talk, most of which is somewhat vague. But in the jargon of ethnomethodology it is "practically adequate to the task at

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[13] On which both much fiction but also psychoanalysis rests.

[14] This is not to assume that 'the everyday' is a stable universal category: it is locally defined by what requires comment and explanation, the social equivalent of the unmarked case in linguistics. In an extreme case, in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery as studied by Liberman (2004) debate and argument is part of the everyday!

[15] As illustrated over the longue durée by Bloch's examination of Merina circumcision ritual in 'From Blessing to

hand" and that is sufficient for ordinary speakers. It should then also be sufficient for the analysts but this has not been the case, because, in large measure, the analysts have been beguiled by texts which have very different properties from the spoken words of conversation. Conversational utterances are both the ephemera of everyday life and its most basic constituents.

My base proposition is that any/every utterance is provisional, pending its reception, so at the time of utterance there is no fixed meaning despite retrospective claims to the contrary. This has profound implications for philosophy and anthropology alike. For example, the privilege/ priority of the speaker having unique access to what they really mean must go, and once this solipsistic pressure is removed a far more democratic anthropology results. This provisionality is another form of the partiality or incompleteness that was discussed above as merological anthropology. We may be able to achieve confidence in our results, but speaking strictly, we can never be certain. Our knowledge even of the meaning of our own utterances is always incomplete, or partial.

If we allow that, for example, Marilyn Strathern's ideas of partible persona (see below) are a perfectly sensible way of organising the world, and if we also hold that our analytic vocabulary should at least aspire to universality, then anything not consistent with partiality should be eschewed by our analytic terms-of-art. My contention is that not only partible people but also the universality of conversational structure have implications inconsistent with many philosophical positions. Most of my readership will have been raised in the European/ North American cultural and philosophical tradition. What I am seeking to do in this paper is to render problematic some common assumptions. This leaves the options of either re-examining those ideas and, as it were, redoing the philosophy or of abandoning them in favour of a new and different type of philosophy. A benefit of raising these questions is that it makes (anthropology and) human life possible in a way that is understandable by social analysts.

The ethnomethodological argument is that conversational structure makes meaning a

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Violence' (1986).

post-hoc, shared achievement. Meaning is public and social, not interior, private, and prior to utterance. A consequence of this is that the main western philosophical program based on intentions (and actions following from them) is misguided (despite our schooled intuitions to the contrary). Why is this? Conversational success sediments meaning out of the wide range of possible outcomes. Meaning is achieved post hoc and you, the speaker, discover what you meant at the time of utterance along with your co-conversants. A similar argument can be made for goal-driven behaviour. Intentions, like meanings, are realised only after the fact. They cannot then be used to explain those actions. The way we approach goal-directed behaviour needs a new analytic language.

On the conventional view intentions are language-like. One intention differs from another in the same way that one word differs from another; by virtue of its meaning, so the intentional objects are the meaning of words. For example, how do you know I am thirsty? Because I act, for example, by saying 'I am thirsty' or '*Mì né méh núá*' or by silently pouring a glass of water and drinking it. I open my mouth and utter or I open my mouth and drink (sometimes one before the other). The argument about meaning and conversation applies *ipso facto* to intentions and actions. Actions are public and social and through them we (and others) learn what we term 'our intentions' are or were. So though I am happy with the idea of goal directed action I'm not sure if the way we act is best characterised by a meaning driven vocabulary of analysis.

Consider Marilyn Strathern's ideas of Partial/Partible People (1992a). Strathern paints a fragmentary picture in which social relationships constitute individuals (dividuals), in which through a mesh of relationships a person comes into being (and changes as that mesh changes). So Strathern questions the western philosophical tradition of the individual and hence the Cartesian program. You can be certain that you exist but not that you are the same person as existed yesterday let alone a few years ago. As mortuary prohibitions make clear, as the generations change, you are changed: in some Australian groups the spoken lexicon is or was radically changed for years following a death so as to avoid uttering syllables that formed part of the deceased kins-person's name.

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Strathern's approach has other philosophical implications: if there isn't a constant persisting individual then there cannot be goal directed behaviour as has classically been portrayed by philosophers in the western tradition. It is one thing to say that 'I am thirsty' or stride across a room to get some water. Its quite another to do the long term planning that other goals imply. Yet that is exactly what PNG Highlanders are doing when arranging their pig feasts and ceremonial exchanges. So despite the lack of persisting individuals (the holders of intentions) that western philosophy assumes and which Strathern puts into question, the planning occurs. The planning and strategizing of Ongka as he planned his big Moka (Nairn 1976) provides a very clear demonstration that goal orientated behaviours occurs… But this is now a new problem since the basic units (individuals) the holders of intentions and goals have gone. What we need is a new analytic vocabulary or approach to intentionality.[16]

Partibility is not the same as partiality but they are related. If people are partible then our knowledge of others can only be partial; always and necessarily incomplete. We know only some parts of the people we deal with, so our knowledge of them is incomplete. Even when dealing with those I know best such as my own children, I change as they change so the memories of their early years are, on Strathern's account, those of a different composite person, not identical with me. My current access to memories of those babies is partial because of both the frailties of memory and the way the memory holder, the remembering self, has changed.

The future of realism. Accounts, Warrants, Interests: Epistemologies for a twenty-first Century Anthropology.

A stereotype for our time pits (male) scientific realism against (female) post-modern

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[16] This parallels the problems, flagged above, of taking an author's plans for the text they write as a model for speakers and utterances. If both meaning and intention must be changed how can they be squared with our own experience as intentional beings? To answer this needs more than another paper in itself. I think the answer lies in different degrees of precision and vagueness. Ongka may, from the outset, intend to organise a big Moka. However, this does not imply that he then has a prior commitment to the specfic subsequent actions entailed by that intention. We may specify our gaols in advance but then work out the details in the middle of the actions that strive to obtain those goals.

interpretation. Life may be more fun (relaxed, unconstrained) as a post-modern relativist but readers will not be surprised that I side with dour empiricists for all the problems that this entails. As I hope I can explain, the arguments used against realism in the end serve to endorse it. This is both at the level of basic ontology[17] and as an important social myth which serves as an orienting impulse for anthropology or as a guide to a mode of life. As anthropologists we should recognise the importance of these things in the social system under description and recognise it as our own. In short, without the impulse or desire for accurate description there's no point in continuing, there is nothing to debate.

That said, it is not straightforward, which is both the problem and what makes it so interesting. This also explains why versions of this debate do not go away. As the Social Studies of Knowledge, Technology and Science (henceforth STS) have shown, even hard science is, at least in part, a social construct with its own patterns and forms of politics, ideology and policing. Recognising this doesn't commit us to a profound relativism. I note parenthetically that relativism is only worth arguing about if it is profound: methodological relativism and symmetrical accounts of success and failure as pioneered by STS are old hat in anthropology (see e.g. Latour 1996). It comes down to Rorty's claim that 'there are no interesting differences between the aims and procedures of scientists and those of politicians' (1991:172). I disagree. I think that the resistances or recalcitrance of the world (however construed) as acknowledged even by stalwarts of STS as Knorr-Cetina (1995: 148) are important. An (any) account of the

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[17] While this paper was being refereed an ontological breakthrough was announced (Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007). The authors argue for a different approach to objects and anthropology which they characterise as ontological, contrasting with the epistemological stance of traditional approaches. However, the distinction of the object of knowledge from what is known remains; the issue of representation is inescapable. Their way evades the problem by denying the distinction: they seek to conceive of new worlds. They invite us to consider new thought-objects in which things straightforwardly *are* meanings rather than possessing meanings, and hence there are no objects to be represented in thought since their meanings simply exist as part of their being. This is provocative and intriguing but, in my opinion, fails to convince. Their solution takes us from one set of problems to another: their approach reinstates incommensurable world views (ontologies) without any way of moving between them, like Leibnitzian monads without God to correlate them). They are no ways of deciding how many ontologies there are or can be: does a society contain just one ontology or are there different ones for males, females, old young, initiates and non-initiates? This descends into solipsism too fast for comfort. Without comparison and discussion between worlds we cannot be in a position to gain the insights to enable us to move between them. So having taken us to ontologies we return again to epistemological problems: representation again.

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world which writes out the efficacy of antibiotics as purely ideological is less interesting, less worthy of debate than one which looks at the way the efficacy of antibiotics has been played out by *all* the interested parties (commercial copyright owners and scientists among them). To take a less controversial subject let me return to what Rom Harré calls Lenin's rule: 'the best explanation of empirical success is the truth'. The problem for relativist deconstructivists is the connection between accounts and action, which elsewhere they celebrate (e.g Potter 1996). As Fischer put it 'the temptation of turning all accounts of science into the status of mere storytelling must be resisted: the chemical effects of drugs, or the geometry of the earth, or the physics of the atmosphere are not *just* stories' (2003: 213 my emphasis). What I have in mind is the relationship of atomic physics to commonplace mass-produced objects such as fluorescent light bulbs, and in particular the processes of their manufacture. On the basis of C19th physics we can calculate the average distance between gas molecules at different temperatures and pressures. By adding some work from early C20th physics about energy states and radiation we can calculate the distance that an electron must travel if it is to excite the atoms it collides with, if the collisions are to knock the molecule into a higher energy state from which it will jump back down by emitting energy in the form of UV. The result of all this old-fashioned school physics is to explain both why the gases in fluorescent tubes are at low pressure (to increase distances between collisions so they are sufficiently energetic) and why the tubes have fluorescent coatings (to convert the UV radiation emitted to visible light). The point of this excursion is to point to the industrial/ manufacturing implications of some physics. The undoubted interestedness of the accounts may affect whether factories get built (or not built if the technologies are suppressed, as parodied in Alexander Mackendrick's 1951 film 'The Man in the White Suit') but not the processes involved. There are resistances beyond our control as manifested in the problems of breathing underwater or in the jumping from windows rhetoric examined by Edwards, Ashmore and Potter 1995). That this is an interested, rhetorical point does not rob it of ***all*** its force or persuasiveness.

If we loose sight of the resistances (from the world out there) then our accounts become

disoriented, uncritical and not themselves capable of critical scrutiny. As Gilbert Lewis puts it: 'sceptical theories of knowledge and philosophies of pervasive doubt, unqualified as to domain, or limit, or degree, seem designed to offer the strong relativist or the deconstructivist grounds for doing nothing, for detached contemplation' (2000: 14).

What is missed is any room for causation and intention, however hard these are to discern, however imperfect and tentative our understanding of these may be. What is at issue is the recalcitrant world and how we inhabit it. If we stress the interestedness of all accounts we are in danger of loosing sight of the central, causal nexus which we are trying to comprehend, and if sometimes the causality is unclear then that shouldn't distract us from the easy cases. Causality can explain Stump's (1996) defence of experimentation (as partially disconnected from particular theories) and answer Rorty's charge. In other words, the interesting epistemological difference between 'the aims and procedures of scientists and those of politicians' is the kind of causality at issue. The Titanic may have sunk because of commercial interests that led to the skimping of safety features during construction, the overselling of safety in the marketing, the under-crewing and over speeding granted a given course and time of year. But to accept all of these is not to reduce to *zero* the role of the iceberg.[18]

At the end of his book (1996) Jonathan Potter refrains from giving a conclusion. He sees this as empowering and leaving the reader with the problems of representation that realism will not make go away. I see it as an abdication of responsibility. The 'Social Construction of Facts' does not oblige us to be relativists, nor make realism impossible, just harder. For anthropology this is scarcely news. We have been worrying about the terms of our representations for generations, and we know that a term taken in one context may not be appropriate in another (consider the term 'family' as an example). Facts like icebergs are unpopular. They are constructed yet can be obstinate or recalcitrant. All in all better done without. That way elegant

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[18] Michael M.J. Fischer who is usually classed as an anthropological postmodernist expresses a similar sentiment when discussing the autobiographies of scientists: 'the temptation of turning all accounts of science into the status of mere storytelling must be resisted: the chemical effects of drugs, or the geometry of the earth, or the physics of the atmosphere are not just stories.' (Fischer 2003: 213).

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theorising can proceed unabated, it may even be poetic. If talking of facts is seen as dinosaur-like it may be worth recalling that not all dinosaurs suffered extinction. Indeed, several contemporary biological families are actually direct descendants of dinosaurs. To push the metaphor somewhat further, I am trying to trace evolutionary patterns where a sophisticated empiricism can emerge in 21st century anthropology.

The results of STS as well as other epistemological concerns imply that there are problems with warrants for knowledge. It is not easy or straightforward to know how the world is or to be in a position to make statements about it. Some may conclude that if the world exists then it is essentially unknowable; we are essentially monadic without the help Leibniz could take from God to correlate our perceptions with the world. This way lies solipsism and quietism: there is no world to act on so no actions to undertake.

Rather than agree with such pessimistic but consistent conclusions, I would start with intersubjectivity and different people giving different accounts. People and interaction are prior (primitive in the logical sense), meaning secondary. The question we then have to answer is why we would give any one account more credence than another. Some say they should be trusted because their statement is underwritten by a deity. Others say their statement is underwritten by other deities. Others again say it's common sense, that it's obvious to all right thinking folk. Among yet other explanations are a) explanation by interests 'They would say that wouldn't they?' (either of an individual or social class/ gender/ company/ institution etc) or b) warranted by experience. A sub-type of this may be labelled science (with a small s) where active attempts are made to find out more about what's going on (versions of empiricism).

None of these are exclusive but they are cumulative. When an interested account also has empirical warrants it is importantly different from an account whose warrants are *only* interested. In a similar fashion, Lakoff and Johnson see 'convergent evidence' as providing the possibility of realism without denying the social determination of individual results (1999: 81-90 contra. Hastrup 2004: 450-60). It should be noted that the position I am describing is a form of what Roy

Bhaskar has called 'critical realism'.[19] Interested accounts are, of course, partial accounts, so this form of realism forms the basis for merological anthropology.

Traps for thought

As a way of moving towards a conclusion I now present some reflections on three traps for thought.

1) The Anthropometric principle: constraints on possibility

In astrophysics the anthropometric principle is used to establish constraints on boundary conditions, setting the range of possible values of important physical constants. The fact of our existence allows us to infer quite a lot about how the universe is structured. This is far from everything but something nonetheless, and can be done with confidence. Importantly, we can eliminate many possible values for boundary conditions, eliminating all universes lacking stable stars where planets with atmospheres do not form. There are sociological and anthropological versions of this: for example, the truism that unstable societies do not survive. It remains the case that most anthropologists study societies with sufficient stability to maintain languages over generations. For all the demonstrable acceleration of change through the Twentieth Century there remain very important sociological continuities between the beginning and end of the century even in countries such as USA, Japan and those of Northern Europe. Another set of boundary conditions relate to our physical selves. The human animal must feed and reproduce. On this perspective, the domains of physical, biological and genetic anthropology set the scene for, and hence constrain the domain of social anthropology. No social system incapable of sustaining human life will persist and hence be available for study. Famously, the original Shakers did not

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[19] See Bhaskar 1989 and Lewis 2000. Porter 1993 and Steinmetz 1998 discuss applications of the idea in the social sciences. Highmore (2007) has recently argued for a different form of middle ground between realism and relativism based on the work of Michel de Certeau leading him to agree with Donna Haraway: 'The alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology. Relativism is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally. The 'equality' of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical enquiry. Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well.' (1991: 191 quoted Highmore (2007:17)).

reproduce, believing sex to be sinful. We cannot study a Shaker community today because there are none. At the risk of tautology it should be recognised that we can study other groups with unsustainable beliefs but not over the long term.

2) Causation and probability[20]

One of the hardest ideas to come to terms with is that of probability and the lack of determination in sub-atomic physics, co-existing with our lived experience of a world of hard realities in which actions have clear consequences. A cloud of electrons will behave in a precise, predictable fashion, yet this is to talk about the crowd not the individuals that comprise it (there are gestalt effects). We cannot predict what any single electron will do. However, because we are animals whose bodies are the scale they are, we consciously interact with objects sized from millimetres to metres but typically not much smaller and not much bigger. At these scales quantum indeterminacy does not apply, we are only dealing with clouds of atoms, molecules and so forth, never single ones. Yet there are parallels to quantum indeterminacy in everyday life, why some people win the lottery and others do not, why only one of a pair exposed to a virus fell ill, why some people missed a plane that subsequently crashed.[21] To say it is chance is unsatisfactory yet that's what we are left with. Zande have a more satisfying explanation: the second spear, the *ultimate* cause of an event (achieved through witchcraft). As Evans-Pritchard explains (1937), for Zande there are no chance occurrences. The writer Stanislaw Lem, working somewhere between the genres of science fiction and the detective story, has summarized the problem in the novella 'The Chain of Chance' (1981).

> Now in trying to determine the a priori probability of such a coincidence, we find it impossible to offer a rational, that is to say, mathematically valid explanation. ... When it comes to unique and statistically unclassifiable events, the theory of probability is inapplicable (1981: 297).

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[20] This section alludes to but can in no-wise do justice to a complex and long established topic in the philosophy of science, as summarized by Wesley Salmon (1998) who even uses some examples from anthropology.

[21] In late 2006 it was reported in the media that the 'random play' function of Apple's Ipod has been modified because users refused to believe it was picking songs randomly. The new procedure picks tracks non-randomly to achieve a pattern which we experience as random (in which multiple tracks from the same singer are unusual).

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In this story a detective is sent to try and uncover a set of mysterious deaths that have little in common apart from their bizarre behaviour in the hours before their death in a seaside resort in southern Italy. In the end, the investigator, despairing of his task and about to quit, replicates the circumstances and almost dies in the process.

According to the author the investigator suffered from 'the classic dilemma of every investigation into the unknown. Before its limits can be defined the agent of causality must be identified, but before the agent of causality can be identified one must first of all define the subject under investigation' (1981: 278). When considering a single event the probabilities do not help us, for *this* is what happened (no matter how unlikely). We live in a single world continuous with our past and also our future uncertain though that may be.[22] Multiple parallel universes may well be a good way to think about the overall picture of how quantum indeterminacy produces determined outcomes at scales we experience. But even this is not enough to cope with the causal universe of experience. Perhaps this is the reason that too much stress on negotiation and construction seems misplaced: we live in a world in which things happen, and in which one thing leads to another. We can and do argue about what these are, but by and large, our arguments do not affect the things happening. We are patients more than we are actors. This a humbling conclusion for practitioners which should lead to a modest (partial) anthropology.

3) Hindsight and the equal treatment of possibilities[23]

In his study of a failed public transport project (Aramis) Latour (1996) provides a salutary warning about the dangers of the 'sociology of hindsight':

> No one can study a technological project without maintaining the *symmetry* of explanations.
> If we say that a successful project existed from the beginning because it was well conceived and that a failed project went aground because it was badly conceived, we are saying nothing. We are only repeating the words 'success' and 'failure,' while placing the cause of both at the *beginning* of the project, at its conception. 1996: 78

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[22] Philip Pullman's 'His Dark Materials' trilogy considers a universe in which an infinity of parallel universes exists and some people have the technology to move between them.
[23] This section is based on Zeitlyn 1997.

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Suspicions about the history written by the victors is one of the ways that we have moved beyond functionalism. One of the wonderful things explored by Latour is how after the event (here failure) everyone admits to private doubts which went along with the public statements of confidence which were used to justify the continuation of the project, engineers told managers that the practical problems were solvable, the managers told the politicians it could be done within budget and in reply the politicians told them that they wanted it done. All now deny speaking sincerely. But this is how consensus was reached, and one assumes similar processes were at work in other projects which have come to fruition, allowing the private doubts to be conveniently forgotten. Latour also takes us on an exhilarating ride examining the financial and political environment in which Aramis was developed. But this is not a context-explains-all account:

> The work of contextualising makes the connection between a context and a project completely unforeseeable. … Hence the idiocy of the notion of 'pre-established context.' The people are missing; the work of contextualisation is missing. The context is not the spirit of the times which would penetrate all things equally. Every context is composed of individuals who do or do not decide to connect the fate of a project with the fate of the small or large ambitions they represent. ... No indeed, nothing happens by accident; but nothing happens by context either. 1996: 137-8

For Latour the actors do the sociology not the analysts. Each actor has to understand the social (and physical) world they live in. So the different players in the project can give accounts of all the other players. Different 'social physics' are invoked to explain why so and so (an individual or a company, or a thing, a vital component of the machine was pushed or pulled into a certain behaviour. Latour encourages us to relish the ambiguity of 'it wouldn't work' (could not or did not want to?). On a regular basis we attribute intentionality to non-intentional entities, which range from companies (where the attribution has a legal sanction) through nation-states to objects.

The actors make sense of this morass of different, partial, partisan story telling. They have to. Latour's sociological analysis is not an attempt to make sense of the project but merely follows that of the actors themselves. They have to construct enduring entities to which they can orientate themselves and their actions. Entities such as the desires of the government funding

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agency, what the Paris underground authority really wants, and the state of the computer system running the automated cars. 'The interpretations offered by the relativist actors are *performatives*. They prove themselves by transforming the world in conformity with their perspective on the world. By stabilizing their interpretation, the actors end up creating a world-for-others that strongly resembles an absolute world with fixed references points' (p 194-5). But the difference must be insisted upon and it is within that difference that social negotiation as an everyday continuing process occurs. The anthropological account follows after the fact, and attempts to square the circle by being fair to all sides including those who contradict one another. To do this we must be modest, not attempting to have the final word, and accepting the incompleteness of our knowledge.

Conclusions

Rather than aiming at universal scope, at completeness, I have more modest aspirations, I am attempting to work with theories that are explicitly incomplete, with the joins or possible junction points left showing as an invitation for collaboration and continuation, as a reminder of the work that remains to be done (hence the label 'merological'). Incomplete they may be, but just like the everyday understandings that underlie our everyday competences, the theories are adequate for the task-at-hand: the problems at issue. Perhaps I should be even more cautious and say rather that the theories are more or less adequate for the task-at-hand. What I like about this style of approach is that it moves from a polarised contrast between True or False to a continuum of approaches ranging from the woefully inadequate to others found to be helpfully adequate, which Hastrup might call (2004) those that have 'got it right'. However, Hastrup confuses empiricism with positivism (2004: 468-9) and although she is implicitly critical of radical postmodernism[24] she also sees it as freeing us from the shackles of 'positivist thinking'. Yet without empiricism the idea of 'narrative responsibility' becomes vacuous or prone to endless

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[24] See Reyna (1994) for an extremely lucid account of the problems of interpretative anthropology in general, and p. 563 for discussion of positivism in particular.

ideological redefinition. Of course, we have no independent knowledge of the world independent of observation and interaction, but the world is recalcitrant, it is not *entirely* of our making – it is this point which is acknowledged even by those in the social studies of science school such as Knorr-Cetina (1995: 148) which points to the difference between Hastrup and me: on my account we are trying to comprehend an obdurate or recalcitrant world in which people live their lives as best they can, constrained (*not* determined) by the world and their understanding of it. Our comprehension is always partial, and uncertain but can be discussed and improved. We can assemble collages of different views, collating the different parts (even though there is no ultimate, perfect or complete view) and discuss different ways of summarizing them even though they may contain inconsistencies. There is a final irony to consider: despite the profound philosophical difference between us, our practice as field anthropologists may not be greatly different.

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