What Kind of Political Anthropology?

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Anthropology and the political: what happened to politics?

I cannot help but start this reflection with a paradox. I do not present it in order to solve it, but simply because any debate of what political anthropology is (or should be) today ought to relate to it. The paradox is simple: anthropology has become increasingly political, even politicized, exactly in the same period as the established subcategory of the discipline, political anthropology, has faded away, and exactly as many works carried out under this category were either deconstructed or pushed into oblivion – mostly the latter.

The term "political anthropology" was one of those sub-disciplinary categories produced by post-war "classical anthropology", and accordingly inspired by the major post-war –isms; functionalism, structuralism and Marxism. The demise of these narratives led to the momentary retreat of "political anthropology" in the early 1980s. And yet, from exactly the same moment, anthropology experienced a return to politics via post-structuralism. The shift in the social and political sciences toward an understanding of power outside and beyond state and sovereignty, replaced by a focus on representation and symbolic power, prepared the way for what may even be recognized as an "anthropological turn" in politics.

This development has changed the language we use when speaking about politics, as it altered and clearly widened meanings of the "political" in the first place. In terms of terminology, the tendency since the late 1980s has been to put "politics of … " in front of every single anthropological theme. There is a "politics of" gender, race, identity, reproduction, citizenship, genes, space and place, state, storytelling, globalization, to name just the more conspicuous ones. This almost ubiquitous "politics of" indicates that the world as such has become politicized, including of course "culture" itself. This so-called "politics of culture" was not invented by anthropologists, but evidently results from larger societal transformations, much beyond what can possibly be discussed here.

This state of affairs makes it virtually impossible to interrogate the *what*, *how*, *why* and *where* of current political anthropology: one is immediately thrown into the impossible task of reviewing not only the entire discipline of anthropology, but also the many interfaces between anthropology and the social and political sciences in a world of blurry boundaries. Risking an unfair generalization (itself a strategy of power), it is however possible to identify today's "politics of" anthropology in terms of approach or maybe even "world-view". To invoke a "politics of" very often relates to an explicit or implicit use of discourse analysis, a thematic focus on discursive power and discursive practices by means of which concrete phenomena are unmasked and heavily criticized. This very often involves a critical stance towards centralized or institutionalized forms of power and modes of representation from the vantage point of peripheries. Edward Said's or Michel Foucault's writings from the 1970s are often referred to here, together with a range of post-structuralist social theorists from outside the discipline of anthropology. In so many ways, contemporary "politics of" anthropology is a marriage between critical theory approaches and postmodern, "Foucaldian" emphases on power and representation, held together by the bottom-up approaches that have always defined anthropology. Much "politics of" anthropology

simultaneously draws on older (Leftist) vocabularies of repression as well as resistance and newer ones that stress strategies of representation, local agency and diversity.

One of the visible effects of this development is that while everything has become political, some of the earlier, more definable political themes have been pushed into the background – and so the anthropologists who established those themes as nodes of debate. The delimitation of "politics" was of course never an easy task. Indeed, one of the main insights provided by political anthropologists was always that the "political" cannot be so neatly separated, as the political sphere intersects with social and cultural patterns and practices. This was especially true in societies where an institutional differentiation within the political realm had simply not taken place. However, anthropologists have been successful in pointing out that even in modern states a great deal of "politics" takes place via informal networks and informal institutions, underpinning or overlapping with the more objectifiable ones that political scientists concentrate on. Here, anthropology has undeniably provided a supplement to, and an enriching of, the wider social and political sciences. Nonetheless, this insight never prevented post-war political anthropologists from converging around a series of key questions that guided empirical analysis and gave orientation to the theoretical debates. Very broadly, these debates were oriented towards comparative studies of forms of political organization, types of political leadership, and ways of dealing with conflict and co-operation in the absence of formal institutions.

Which then, one may ask, are today's key questions? This is not an easy question to answer, and any answer given will depend heavily on one's perspective. The most recent work that attempts a survey of contemporary political anthropology is the "Companion to the anthropology of politics", published in 2004 (edited by David Nugent and Joan Vincent). The reader contains the following 28 chapters:

> Affective States, After Socialism, AIDS, Citizenship, Cosmopolitanism, Development, Displacement, Feminism, Gender, Race and Class, Genetic Citizenship, The Global City, Globalization, Governing States, Hegemony, Human Rights, Identity, Imagining Nations, Infrapolitics, Mafias, Militarization, Neoliberalism, Popular Justice, Postcolonialism, Power Topographies, Race Technologies, Sovereignty, Transnational Civil Society, Transnationality.

Editors always have to make hard choices, but the selection of representative themes defining political anthropology today is hardly random, and does indeed reflect a trend. "The Companion" no doubt makes an excellent reading, yet one can easily list 28 other themes that do result strikingly absent:

> Alliances, Bureaucracy, Caste, Civilization, Clan, Crime, Crisis, Democracy, Elections, Elites, Hierarchy, Law, Leadership, Mimesis (or Mimetic Crisis), Modernity, Myth, Kingship, Patron-Client Relations, Punishment, Resistance, Segmentation, Poverty, Religion and Politics, Revolutions, Ritual Politics, Tribal Politics, Violence, War.

In other words, the most salient themes and ideas of political anthropology as it developed throughout the 20th century are somehow gone with the wind. Of course, sometimes older

terms are brought into new concerns and thematic fields that have simply been conceptually redefined ("war" becomes "militarization"). But most often they are simply abandoned, left behind as a relic of the past, in what seems like a rare and exceptionally clean paradigm shift. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Edmund Leach, Georges Balandier, Victor Turner or Max Gluckman are barely quoted (let alone discussed) in a 500-page companion to political anthropology.[2] The nature of this change can be readily witnessed by comparing the indices of textbooks in political anthropology written in the 1960s with the more recent ones (Schwartz, Turner and Tuden, 1966; Balandier, 1967; Gledhill, 1994; Vincent, 1990; 2002; Lewellen, 2003; Jörke, 2005). Speaking in general terms, anthropology from the 1980s ritually posited itself in contrast to "classical anthropology"; almost every single article published in the 1980s and 1990s started out by somehow denouncing the "classical tradition", clearing the ground for a "new", more (self)-critical and reflexive approach. While this may have been necessary, it has, as far as I can see, had some less fortunate consequences. One can only hope that this journal, *International Political Anthropology*, may also become a forum for discussing exactly this development. Let me continue with just a few preliminary remarks in this direction.

Anthropology and politics, the beginnings

Against the background of the development sketched out above, one must carefully strike a balance: that of recognizing any real gains achieved by the reflexive turn of the 1980s and the still dominant focus on representation, while not throwing away what preceded it. In fact, there might even be compelling reasons for a return to the "classics", *exactly* due to problems of the contemporary political scene, whose underlying challenges or even dangers may in fact be not so new after all. I do not think that an insistence on the term "political anthropology", as indicated by the name of this Journal, can or should imply a call to arms around either new or old paradigms, and I certainly do not think that any attempt to territorially identify or demarcate what the political is or should be about is either possible or desirable. At the same time, "political anthropology" is not a new term. The history and meanings the term carries require respect and consideration.

To a certain extent anthropology was of course always about politics. The very first anthropologists, from Henry Maine, Lewis Henry Morgan, and Edward Tylor, had a direct or indirect relationship to law. Many, like Morgan and John McLennan, were in fact lawyers, and early disciplinary debate was closely related to legal discourse. In this sense, anthropology was critically rooted in legal discourse to much the same extent as sociology, whose founding fathers also held law degrees. The 19th century discussion over the "original society" being male or female was couched in legal terms, as clearly reflected in Johann Jacob Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* (1861). Anthropological focus on politics was naturally inclined towards establishing a typology of political forms, ranging them from their simplest to their most complex forms. Early evolutionism sought to establish the evolutionary ladder by which societies had developed from bands to tribes toward more complex political arrangements in chiefdoms and finally states. Although these attempts often failed, and although the underlying epistemology of early evolutionism has rightly been deconstructed as deeply flawed, the question concerning succession and change of political forms has never been entirely abandoned, nor should it (see Fried, 1969; Kurtz, 2001). The links between cultural/social anthropology and archaeology or paleoanthropology, and a continued interest in bio-cultural evolution, have been more salient in American compared to European anthropology.

Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas, who established the fieldwork tradition, are not always considered founding figures in our standard genealogies of political anthropology, yet both of them paid great attention to political organization in their ethnographies, as did practically all their students. In *Crime and Custom in Savage Society,* Malinowski (1970 [1926]) continued the "legal approach", but sought to analyze law, order, crime and punishment with the help of more solid ethnographic data. Moreover, and this should not be forgotten, both Boas and Malinowski engaged in political themes and discussions outside their primary ethnographic areas of research. Boas used very consciously a comparative anthropological perspective to reflect on political questions like race, nationalism, eugenics and criminology in the West, as in his "Anthropology and Modern Life" (1962 [1928]). In many ways, this was an early "critical" and "reflexive" political anthropology.

Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown is more often referred to as a forefather of political anthropology. His structural functionalism, developed in the pre-war period, was more clearly "political", as single institutions were always analyzed against the larger social order that they were seen to uphold, and this was to become the theoretical background to British political anthropology. In 1927 Robert Lowie had published *The Origin of the State* (1962), trying to liberate the "anthropology of the state" from unilineal, speculative evolutionism. These are some reasons why Georges Balandier (1967) claimed that the foundations of political anthropology were actually laid in the 1920s. This claim can be substantiated by referring to the work of Marcel Mauss, who in the interwar period did in fact seek to establish new foundations for anthropology and sociology. I shall return to this below.

Political anthropology developed as a recognizable, well-defined *branch* of anthropology only in the 1940s and 1950s, as it became a main focus of the British functionalist schools, heavily inspired by Radcliffe-Brown, and openly reacting against evolutionism and historicism. The approach was empirical, with the main bulk of work carried out in colonial Africa. The British structural-functionalist school was institutionalized with *African Political Systems*, edited by Meyer Fortes and E.E. Evans Pritchard (1940). A similar degree of institutionalization of a distinctive political anthropology never took place in post-war America, partly due to the Parsonian (di)vision of the sciences, which artificially relegated anthropology to the sphere of culture and symbolism.

The very strong stress on social equilibrium, which was so evident in Evans-Pritchard's approach, was quickly questioned in a series of works that focused more on conflict and change (Leach, 1954). These works attempted to show how individuals acted within political structures, and that changes took place both due to internal and external pressures. Contradictions and conflict came to the fore. A special version of conflict oriented political anthropology was developed in the so-called "Manchester school", started by Max Gluckman (1963). Gluckman focused on social process and an analysis of structures and systems based on their relative stability. In his view, conflict maintained the stability of political systems through the establishment and re-establishment of crosscutting ties among social actors. Gluckman even suggested that a certain degree of conflict was necessary to uphold society, and that conflict was constitutive of social and political order.

From the 1960s a "process approach" developed, stressing the role of agents (Barth, 1959; Bailey, 1969; Vincent, 1978). It was a meaningful development as anthropologists started to work in situations where the colonial system was being dismantled. The focus on conflict and social reproduction was carried over into Marxist approaches that became particularly dominant in the 1960s and 1970s (Asad, 1973; Friedman, 1975; Schneider and Schneider, 1976; Bourdieu, 1977).

From stateless anthropology to an anthropology in and of the state

While for nearly a century (1860 to 1960 roughly) political anthropology was concerned primarily with politics in stateless societies, a new development started from the 1960s, and is still unfolding: anthropologists increasingly started to study more "complex" social settings in which the presence of states, bureaucracies and markets became more visible in ethnographic accounts. This was not an unexpected development or the result of any sudden discovery of contextuality. From the 1940s and 1950s anthropologists who studied peasant societies in Latin America and Asia had increasingly started to incorporate their local setting (the village) into its larger context, as in Robert Redfield's famous distinction between "small" and "big" traditions, developed in the 1930s (Redfield, 1941). The 1960s and 1970s also witnessed the emergence of Europe as a category of anthropological investigation. This turn toward the study of complex societies made anthropology inherently more political. It was no longer possible to carry out fieldwork in say, Spain, Greece, Italy, Mexico, Algeria, or India without taking into account the way in which all aspects of local society were tied to states and markets. It is true that early ethnographies in Europe had sometimes done just that; they had carried out fieldwork in villages of Southern Europe, as if they were isolated units or "islands". However, from the 1970s that tendency was openly criticized: anthropologists had "tribalized Europe" and if they wanted to produce relevant ethnography they could no longer afford to do so (Boissevain and Friedl, 1975). Contrary to what is often heard from colleagues in the political and social sciences, anthropologists have for more than half a century been careful to link their ethnographic focus to wider social, economic and political structures. This, of course, does not mean to abandon an ethnographic focus on very local phenomena, the care for detail.

In a more direct way, the turn towards complex societies also signified that political themes were increasingly taken up as the main focus of study, and at two main levels. First of all, anthropologists continued to study political organization and political phenomena that lay outside the state-regulated sphere (as in patron-client relations or tribal political organization). Second, they started to slowly develop a disciplinary concern with states and their institutions (and of course with the relationship between formal and informal political institutions). An anthropology of the state unfolded, and it is a most thriving field today. Clifford Geertz' work on the Bali state is an early, famous example (Geertz, 1980). There is today a rich canon of anthropological studies of the state (see for example Abélés, 1990; Trouillot, 2001; Hansen and Stepputat, 2002; Sharma and Gupta, 2006).[3]

From the 1980s onwards there has been an increasing focus on ethnicity and nationalism and ethnic-national conflict developed (Hylland Eriksen, 2002; Heidemann, 2002; Bowman, 2003). "Identity" and "identity politics" became defining themes of the discipline, partly replacing earlier the focus on kinship and social organization. This of course made anthropology even more obviously political, as both ethnicity and nationalism can be understood as the political organization of cultural difference. The interest in cultural/political identity construction also went beyond the nation-state dimension. Increasingly, anthropological fieldwork is today carried out inside bureaucratic structures or in companies. By now, several ethnographies have been carried out in the international organizations (like the European Union) studying the *fonctionnaires* as a cultural group with special codes of conduct, dressing, interaction etc. (Abélès, 1992; Wright, 1994; Bellier, 1995; Zabusky, 1995; MacDonald, 1996; Rhodes, 't Hart, and Noordegraaf, 2007). And

bureaucracy can in fact be studied by living in it – it is far from the rational system we and the practitioners like to think, as Max Weber himself had indeed pointed out long ago (Weber, 2002; Herzfeld, 1992; Gellner and Hirsch, 2001).[4] In a broader vein this relates to the symbolic and ritualistic dimension of politics, for long a core theme in political anthropology (Cohen, 1969; Kertzer, 1988; Rivière, 1988; Bodnar, 1994)

The concern with political institutions has also reinforced a focus on institutionally driven political agency. There is now an anthropology of policy making (Yanow, 1996; Shore and Wright, 1997). This focus has been most evident in "development anthropology" or the anthropology of development, which over the last decades has established itself as one of the discipline's largest subfields. Political actors like states, governmental institutions, NGOs, International Organizations or business corporations are the primary subjects of analysis here. In their ethnographic work anthropologists have cast a critical eye on discourses and practices produced by institutional agents of development in their encounter with local culture (see for example Ferguson, 1994). Development anthropology obviously ties political anthropology to political economy as it concerns the management and redistribution of both ideational and real resources (see for example Hart, 1984). In this vein, Arturo Escobar (1995) famously argued that international development largely helped to reproduce the former colonial power structures.

Over the last two decades many other themes have been opened up. Taken together they are making anthropology increasingly political: post-colonialism, post-communism, gender, multiculturalism, migration, not to forget the umbrella term of globalization. It thus makes sense to say that while anthropology was always to some extent about politics, this is even more evidently the case today. And that is one reason why a journal dedicated to political anthropology just had to be established.

Alternative genealogies?

Where does all this leave us? The sketchy history of political anthropology provided above has purposely stressed continuity. When launching a journal of political anthropology, one necessarily builds upon a long disciplinary history, which involves the most prominent figures of the entire field. This relates even to "classical" thematic concerns that may indeed not be so outdated after all. Patron-client politics, tribalization, segmentation, the rise of new political leadership figures, violence and *wars* more or less define the world in which we live. The comparative study of patron-client relations should still be considered a crucial contribution to the study of politics in many settings. It is simply not possible to reach even a rudimentary understanding of politics in settings like Sicily, Beirut or Lima by relying on formalistic models tied to institutional frameworks. It is not how it functions; it is not how people vote and it is not how political actors create alliances. So why should we stop talking about it? Let me provide concrete evidence to indicate the paradox: readers in political anthropology written after 1990 barely talk about "tribe" any longer – and if they do, it will be mostly to show how "tribe" was discursively created by anthropologists and colonialists. In the meantime, readers in political or social theory have started to *incorporate* this concept (see for example the Routledge Encyclopedia of Social Theory, 2006). This is evidently because tribal organization is well and alive, however "constructed", and one could even argue that new forms of tribal organization are becoming increasingly dominant in parts of the world – and not only in war-torn Afghanistan and Iraq.

The almost wholesale dismissal of "classical anthropology" has, as far as I can see, had another consequence which critically has to do with the "role" of (political) anthropology: the contribution of anthropology to the larger social and political sciences has been largely confined to a question of methodology. Anthropologists can say something else, simply because we do fieldwork, because we see things "from a different perspective". This role is often forced upon anthropologists as straightjackets from colleagues in neighbouring disciplines, but more often than not it is also a self-ascription. We are anthropologists because we talk to normal people, not because we come from a discipline with a different history of theoretical development. It is again true that a "thick description" or a "deep immersion" approach has positively identified the discipline within the larger social sciences (and increasingly so as we started to study the same "complex" societies). But why completely abandon important conceptual and theoretical developments that did take place within (political) anthropology?

Whereas we are quick to search for hidden treasures among literary critics and social theorists we have been somewhat slower to search in our own backyard. And while we have been sharp in our critique of disciplinary forefathers, we have given much less credit to exactly those figures who recognized the limits of the functionalist-structuralist-Marxist paradigms, much before post-modernism or post-structuralism were invented. There *are* indeed good reasons to question the works of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski; but this was realized by figures like Victor Turner and Gregory Bateson some fifty to sixty years ago.

This lack of attention to a wealth of non-mainstream anthropologists is all the more striking given the fact that ideas produced by anthropologists are increasingly starting to circulate among social and political scientists, with surprisingly little effect on the discipline of anthropology itself. One can invoke four salient (but far from exhaustive) examples. While Victor Turner's mature work has only recently been included in a reader of political anthropology (Vincent, 2002) political scientists and sociologists over the last ten years have come to recognize the applicability of Turner's liminality concept to the analysis of social thought and political change (Bauman, 1995; Eisenstadt, 1995; Szakolczai, 1998; 2000). While anthropologists (especially in France) hardly consider René Girard one of "theirs", scholars from other disciplines are now engaged in a systematic application of his ideas in their analysis of religion, politics and violence (Scubla, 1982; Schwager, 2000; Fleming, 2004; Farneti, 2000; Palaver, 2008; Wydra, 2008). While Gregory Bateson is a popular, albeit somewhat ambiguous figure, among anthropologists, he is rarely if ever discussed in political anthropology, and this despite the fact that perhaps Bateson's central concept, schismogenesis, was developed with a view to the understanding of both personality disorders and political crises. And, as a final example, while Marcel Mauss is indeed considered a classic, anthropologists have rarely considered the evident political dimensions of his work, let alone Mauss' political *engagement*. Yet, the now globally influential anti-utilitarian movement builds its entire political theory on *The Gift*. And for Mauss *The Gift* was just that: a *political* theory.

As the exclusion of Marcel Mauss in any standard account of political anthropology is in itself a startling fact, let me finally invoke his example to stress a more general concern. Marcel Mauss is routinely placed in a Durkheim/Mauss/Lévi-Strauss "French school" of anthropology. While it is evidently true that Mauss started out as a pupil of Durkheim, and while it is just as true that Lévi-Strauss took inspiration from Mauss, his teacher, this standard account of a Durkheim/Mauss/Lévi-Strauss trilogy simply misses the whole point, as it encapsulates Marcel Mauss in exactly the two –isms that his approach *cannot* be reduced

to: functionalism and structuralism. There are two ends to the story. First, Mauss never confronted Durkheim openly, not even after his uncle's death. Yet he very clearly sought to provide anthropology and sociology with a completely new foundation, as clearly stated in the last chapter of *The Gift*. Mauss is still today rendered as a very talented Durkheimian, although his mature anthropology/sociology was a clear attempt to establish foundations *outside* a Durkheimian framework. This foundation, however, has nothing to do with Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, which decoded Marcel Mauss and re-inserted the gift-giving principle in a formalistic model of exchange and communication. This was not only a reinsertion of Mauss's work into another type of reductionist stance that leaves little space for historical individuals; it was also a reinsertion of Mauss's thoughts into exactly that neo-Kantian type of formal theorizing that Mauss so carefully had liberated himself from.

In his interpretation, Lévi-Strauss also filtered away the most evident political aspects of Mauss' works. In today's standard reception of Mauss, it is well-known that he was inspired by Socialism, but the substance of his political-economic analysis has largely been lost.[5] While Mauss in his early years was much focused on "archaic" religions, and never abandoned an interest in religion, his mature scholarship, as it developed after Durkheim's death and the end of World War I, was clearly oriented towards a comparative analysis of economic and political systems. The essay on the *Gift* was indeed only a part of Mauss' larger engagement with monetary capitalism (and Mauss was *not* a "utopian socialist" who saw the gift-giving principle as a romantic counter-principle to capitalist market economy; see Hart, 2007b). Mauss also started work on nations and nationalism (Mauss, 1969 [1920]). And finally, Mauss wrote extensively about socialism, both from an academic and politically engaged perspective – a distinction that probably would have made little sense to Mauss himself. Mauss never for a second thought that markets could or should be replaced with Communist states, and made this clear in his account of Russian communism. It is indicative that Mauss's important, path-breaking analysis of the Bolshevik Revolution (Mauss, in Gane 1992, Ch. 7) has received so relatively little attention by political anthropologists, even within the very rich post-Communist literature.

It may be time to engage in reconstructing alternative genealogies of political anthropology while not forgetting the more well-known history of political anthropology alluded to in the above. And this may well turn out as a way to question the persistence of those Enlightenment roots of political anthropology so rightly singled out by Joan Vincent (see her *Introduction*, 2002). There is indeed every indication that this was recognized by Mauss himself, and that he wished to bring our understanding of "politics" in closer contact with Ancient Greek ideals, where the political very simply is what ties the social and moral human being to his or her community in meaningful existence. On this note, all I can do is to leave the last word to Mauss himself and let the closing lines of the Gift speak to us again (1990: 107).

> In certain cases, one can study the whole of human behaviour, and social life in its entirety. One can also see how this concrete study can lead not only to a science of customs, to a partial social science but even to moral conclusions, or rather, to adopt one more old word, 'civility', or 'civics', as it is called nowadays. Studies of this kind indeed allow us to perceive, measure, and weigh up the various aesthetic, moral, religious, and economic motivations, the diverse material and demographic factors, the sum total of which are the basis of society and constitute our common life, the

conscious direction of which is the supreme art, *Politics*, in the Socratic sense of the word.

Notes

[1] The author wishes to thank Lyndsay Krebs for help with the writing of this article.

[2] This of course stands in contrast to the 2002 *Reader in Political Anthropology* edited by Joan Vincent, which, probably more than any other recent overview work in the field, uses the "classics" to inform contemporary scholarship, and vice versa. Kurtz (2001) is another exception.

[3] Hastings Donnan, Thomas Wilson and others started in the early 1990s a productive subfield, an "anthropology of borders", which addresses the ways in which state borders affect local populations, and how people from border areas shape and direct state discourse and state formation (see for example Alvarez, 1996; Thomassen, 1996; Vereni, 1996; Donnan and Wilson, 1994; 1999; 2003).

[4] Michael Herzfeld is also one of the few anthropologists who has analysed political elections. This is still a relatively neglected field of enquiry, despite the evident fact that it is exactly during election campaigns that alliances and local strategies of power come to the fore (see for example Lenclud, 1988; Spencer, 2007).

[5] Fortunately, a recovery of Marcel Mauss has begun. See Fournier, 2006; Hart, 2007a; 2007b.

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