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FOUR COMMENTS ON ANTHROPOLOGY AND CULTURAL RELATIVISM TODAY

Christian Weber's specific claims in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* about the relationship of ethnology to native peoples hardly deserves our attention, so unreservedly arrogant and mean-spirited, as it is, filled with willful ignorance and misrepresentation. I am most puzzled why the editors of the SZ, which I highly respect and regularly read, would suspend their consistently high standards for truthful information and print such a piece for today's readers. In the spirit of this blog that we are responsible for our discipline's public representation, let me respond with three short, and what I take to be accurate, comments the discipline of anthropology (also called ethnology and *Völkerkunde*) today.

First, modern anthropology's first object in the early 20th century was non-Western peoples, especially indigenous people under massive assault, many under the threat of extinction. This object was singular historically and, from today's vantage point, an ethical imperative to study. No other discipline in the Euro-American academy was in the least concerned with these people, and most are still not today. This early research performed a great service in providing an "ethnographic record," as we call it, of cultures and civilizations in moments of early contact with powerful societies and states driven by colonial, imperial, and capitalist motives. The ethnographic record of native people's lives in the twentieth century is an invaluable, unmeasurable contribution that anthropology has made to science. These people remain an object of anthropological research, and the accumulated research on and with them still provides unique and powerful insights into the human condition. Yet, in the last half-century, anthropology has extended its queries well beyond these initial horizons; it has taken up many other objects and explored many other

relationships. It has stretched itself so much in so many directions that, arguably, the concern with alterity is no longer dominant in the discipline. How and why the changing objects we research are related to anthropology's first object is a major question for the discipline today.

Second, perhaps the most important lesson anthropologists learned from the study of people unlike them, foremost from the study of indigenous people, was that research on others must begin with how they view their own worlds. We must begin with their perceptions, which may not be the same as ours. Out of this simple lesson, anthropologists developed the axiom of cultural relativism. This should not be confused with moral relativism. Cultural relativism is a precondition of understanding the other: suspend your moral judgments until you arrive at an understanding and appreciation of what and how the other thinks about and acts in his or her world. Moral relativism is a philosophical doctrine, a particular prescription for ethics, that only some anthropologists adhere to, and often only at a later stage of research. There are other ethical doctrines that anthropologists also appeal to, depending on what stage of research one is talking about, such as a contingent or situated ethics, or an ethics that grows out of intersubjective encounters.

Third, otherness is both an essential feature structuring the larger world and intrinsic to understanding ourselves. A focus on otherness forces us to consider us how we might communicate with them, and the ways in which they communicate with each other that are different than our own. This attempt to understand forms of otherness has led to a focus on relationality, which in turn has become a central point of inquiry in most contemporary anthropology. There is, in many ways, a convergence on relationality by both those researchers who work on otherness and those concerned with structuralist theories. Hence, there is much less research today than in the past which focuses on the essence of things. In point of fact, there

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is also a wider concern with time and history, which also questions the unchanging nature of persons, things, or systems. These particular understandings have led to much more research that considers itself “reflexive,” that is, research where documentation of the changing perspectives of the researcher him- or herself are included in a description of the relationships observed and participated in.

Fourth, older anthropological distinctions such as between culture and nature, custom and law, tradition and modernity, authentic and constructed, cognition and emotion, have largely given way to a focus on the relation between these concepts and their changing definitions, without ever assuming these distinctions to be irrelevant. I personally would like to see more focus on the unconscious in research and how it is communicated, as I have become increasingly convinced that feeling drives and overrides rationality, especially among those most driven by a blind commitment to reason. Only rarely, in my observation, do convincing arguments carry the day. How do we access and communicate with that other level of receptivity that elides our reason?