Diversity Is Our Business

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ABSTRACT Anthropologists have tended to portray their discipline as in crisis and ask whether “the end of anthropology” is near. I offer indicators to suggest that the discipline is alive and well as far as its internal activities are concerned. I then turn to the more worrying question of its external image, understandings and stereotypes more or less common among a wider public: the anthropologist as antiquarian and insensitive, slightly lost in real life. Anthropologists have been ineffective in offering a simple, coherent view of what the discipline is and what holds it together. I propose that a consistent emphasis on “diversity” as what anthropology is about best matches our combined interests and practices. To have a strong “brand” is essential under present-day cultural and political conditions, in and out of academic life. The foregrounding of “diversity” goes with the anthropological concern with ethnography, comparison, and cultural critique.

Keywords: public image, brand, diversity

Almost since the beginnings of anthropology as an organized endeavor, its practitioners—some of them at least—seem to have had a morbid tendency to dwell on the likelihood of the impending demise of the discipline. In Argonauts of the Western Pacific, perhaps the earliest field-based ethnography still reasonably widely read, Bronislaw Malinowski started his foreword by proposing that his discipline was “in the sadly ludicrous, not to say tragic, position, that at the very moment when it begins to put its workshop in order, to forge its proper tools, to start ready for work on its appointed task, the material of its study melts away with hopeless rapidity” (1922). In the 1960s, as he had just moved on to a chair in sociology, Peter Worsley (1966) warned in an oft-cited conference paper with the title “The End of Anthropology?” that the discipline might disappear, or survive only as a particular form of history, if it continued specializing in isolated “primitive societies.” Not so many years later, Rodney Needham (1970), a very different British professor, could foresee that aspects of anthropology would be assimilated into other disciplines, so that future anthropologists might be orientalists, art historians, depth psychologists, political science, or whatever—in each case bringing with them an ethnographic knowledge of other cultures. More recently, George Marcus, beginning to respond to a question of whether the discipline might be falling apart, suggested that “anthropology is not on the verge of disintegration. Institutional inertia alone will keep it going for some time” (Rabinow and Marcus with Faubion and Rees 2008:45) That is hardly a very comforting answer: these days, inertia seems like a rather less reliable feature of academic organization than it may have been in the past. (As Marcus continued his argument, he made it clear that he did not see it as a complete answer either.)

What follows here also first took form in an international lecture series with the overall title “The End of Anthropology?” Although I take on the question mostly by trying to deal at some length with one more specific kind of threat to the discipline, I address it briefly in a more general way first, noting that it reminded me of a very well-known and controversial journal article published about 20 years ago: Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History?” (1989). Fukuyama was of course not concerned with the possible demise of the academic discipline of history but, rather, envisioned the completion of large-scale world historical process, with the end of the Cold War, the decline of state socialism, and the absolutely final triumph of liberal democracy. Although it appeared in a somewhat obscure publication, the article nonetheless drew a great deal of attention worldwide, yet when Fukuyama (1995) reviewed its reception some years after its publication, it turned out he was not altogether pleased. He complained that he had very often been misunderstood. He could list Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail Gorbachev, the first President Bush, and Hosni Mubarak among the people who, noting in their speeches that history still goes on, had rejected what they had thought was his thesis. But probably they had not read the article—and perhaps
of writing; and between theory and practical concerns. In a postparadigmatic period, anthropologists tend to be rea-
sonably comfortable with, and stimulated by, bricolages that
allow them to combine different intellectual strands in new
ways and take them to new materials. And Knauff sees
such tendencies as characteristic not only of anthropology’s
present but also of its continued renewal and future promise.
Although his survey focused on sociocultural anthropology
in the United States, I am inclined to believe that we can dis-
cern the same tendencies elsewhere in the anthropological
world. No real state of crisis here either, then.

More dramatically, one might imagine that the end of
anthropology could come about as a part of a more general
dissolution of the entities called disciplines, a very large-
scale change in the scholarly landscape. As we move in on
many current issues, tendencies, and phenomena, discipline
boundaries tend to get blurred. We also now encounter
sophisticated and interesting analyses of changes in the mode
of production of knowledge, toward more interdisciplinary
and transdisciplinary styles of organization (Gibbons et al.

Now it is not that during my years as an inhabitant of
that landscape, mostly in my European corner of it, I have
always been entirely pleased with its existing shape. In the
humanities and social sciences, it may rather often have been
an obstacle to vitality and creativity that discipline bound-
aries have been too sharply demarcated, intellectually and
organizationally. Yet I do not think the best solution is to
abolish disciplines, as bodies of knowledge and as intellectual
communities. Occasionally I hear colleagues declaring that
they would not be so concerned if the discipline of anthro-
pology disappears from the organizational chart of universities,
as long as the ideas of anthropology continue to be propa-
gated there, someplace, in some form. That may sound ad-
mirably broadminded—and rather in line with Needham’s
prognosis—but it still leaves me worried. As a matter of
academic Realpolitik, I believe the survival and continued
development of this kind of cluster of ideas and practices
are best served by an institutional power base of their own.
Meanwhile, in that same period when U.S. universities tend
to be overwhelmingly dominant in the global ranking lists
of academic excellence, one might keep in mind that these
institutions have mostly not seemed inclined to close down
discipline departments in favor of alternative modes of or-
ganization. As I understand it, they continue to be much
more likely to support both discipline departments and vari-
ous cross-cutting formats for interdisciplinary encounters.
So if these institutions are to stand as models for a success-
ful, intellectually productive organization of academic life
everywhere, disciplines would not seem likely to go away
soon.

After such mostly optimistic remarks about the
prospects for anthropology, however, let me point to some
circumstances that I find rather more disturbing. If what I
have said mostly relates to a fairly healthy situation within
the discipline, in its internal activities, I think we ought to

neither had their speech writers. Moreover, Fukuyama also
found that many of his commentators had failed to note that
his original article title had ended with a question mark.

This kind of formulation, then, is a bit risky. Some
people might mistake a rhetorical question, or a titil-
ating courtship with imagined danger, for a prognosis or a
statement of fact. And in these times of information or dis-
information overload, they may not remain around, with
undistracted attention, to hear the elaborated and possibly
obscure answer. In fact, all they remember might be that
first catchy string of words.

I see some number of reasons why the answer to the
question of whether we’ve come to “the end of anthro-
pology?” should be “no.” The number of practitioners and
students of anthropology has grown greatly over the past half-
century; the scope of the discipline has kept widening.
In the early 20th century, there were few anthropologists outside
the countries that had overseas empires or those where dom-
inant white settlers had indigenous populations within the
national borders. Now just about all countries have their own
anthropologists (even if it is true that numbers and working
conditions vary considerably), so anthropology is now as
close as it has ever been to realizing its potential as a truly
global endeavor. Additionally, as far as intellectual vitality is
concerned, anyone who wanders through the book exhibits
at major national or international anthropology meetings,
or just skims through the catalogs of the relevant publishing
houses, can hardly fail to marvel at the many books contin-
uously produced within the discipline (in times when “the
future of the book” also seems to be in question). In fact,
the number of journals devoted wholly or in large part to
anthropology seems also to have grown substantially in the
latter decades of the 20th century. (In 1970, e.g., there was
as yet no American Ethnologist, Cultural Anthropology, Social
Anthropology, Anthropology Today, Critique of Anthropology, An-
thropological Theory, Focaal, Ethnography, Identities, or Public
Culture.) This seems not to be a time to suggest that the
last anthropologist to leave the building should turn off the
light.

How are we doing with regard to our scholarly inter-
ests? In his major overview of contemporary anthropology,
Michael Herzfeld concludes that “it is abundantly clear that
the vast increase in available topics, scale of perception,
and sheer complexity of subject-matter do not seem to be
compelling the discipline to early retirement” (2001a:19).
Probably most of us simply want to get on with our work,
which by now does not appear to be inevitably shaped by
any of the more dramatic theoretical divides or confronta-
tions of the later decades of the past century. In a wide-
ranging survey, aptly titled “Anthropology in the Middle,”
Bruce Knauff (2006) has argued that recent thought within
the discipline has tended to move away from grand theory
into a fertile middle ground where new connections cross-
cut such divides as those among global, regional, and local
scales; between structures and events; between ethnography
and history; between objectivism and experimental genre
be more concerned with the present relationship of anthropology to the surrounding society and its public life.

ANTHROPOLOGY BASHING
It seems long ago that a well-known cultural critic would celebrate an anthropologist as a hero, the way Susan Sontag did with Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1966, in her book of essays, *Against Interpretation*. (Although there were reminders of such times more or less worldwide in the obituaries for Lévi-Strauss after he died in 2009.) We now draw less honorable mention.

An example that I wish I did not have: one of the critical moments, more precisely low points, of Barack Obama’s campaign in the presidential primaries in the spring of 2008 was when he spoke—privately, or so he thought—to a gathering of San Francisco Bay Area supporters about how small-town people in “middle America” had grown “bitter” over lost jobs, which made them “cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren’t like them” (Bai 2008). The statement was reported and commented on widely, and it was for a while seen as a threat to his candidacy. Commenting self-critically later on, Obama described this as his “biggest boneheaded move” and told his *New York Times* interviewer that it had sounded as if he was “talking to a bunch of wine-sipping San Francisco liberals with an anthropological view toward white working-class voters” (Bai 2008). What he really meant, he told the interviewer, was that “these voters have a right to be frustrated because they’ve been ignored . . . in fact, if you’ve grown up and your dad went out and took you hunting, and that is part of your self-identity and provides you a sense of continuity and stability that is unavailable in your economic life, then that’s going to be pretty important, and rightfully so. And if you’re watching your community lose population and collapse but your church is still strong and the life of the community is centered around that, well then, you know, we’d better pay attention to that” (Bai 2008).

Here it seems to me, then, that the candidate Obama assigns a stereotypically distant view, lacking in empathy, to anthropology—and then proceeds to sketch, as its opposite, precisely the sort of close, contextualizing understanding that we as anthropologists are much more likely to claim for ourselves. And from this particular source, we may find the stereotype so much more surprising because we might have thought this candidate should have got his anthropological awards to publicize striking waste of taxpayers’ money, at times makes a good point: one of his more celebrated instances with musty, forgotten archives and spiral notebooks in the field from the heights of the ivory tower. 

Yet another kind of anthropology bashing may often be gentler. This involves the place of the discipline in time, describing it in one way or other as an anachronism, an activity out of the past. Thus, when an electronic journal named *Inside Higher Ed*, devoted to news of higher education, reported on what had been noteworthy at a recent annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, the introductory line in the correspondent’s report read: “Evoking associations with musty, forgotten archives and spiral notebooks in the field, anthropology doesn’t immediately come to mind as a discipline fully situated in the modern, wired world” (Guess 2007). Yet the writer went on to affirm that in fact, “anthropologists have been tackling the implications of technologies on ethnography with each new innovation, from handheld 16-millimeter film cameras and cassette tapes several decades ago to Internet and digital video in more recent times” (Guess 2007).

A second example is from a couple of years earlier. The journal *Fortune Small Business* devoted an article discussing the fact that to understand the software needs of entrepreneurs, Microsoft had hired anthropologists to undertake field studies of small firms all over the United States (Murphy 2005).
This was indeed the cover story of the issue: on the cover, under the rubric “Pygmy hunters,” was a cartoon of Bill Gates, Microsoft’s founder, wearing a pith helmet. Gates’s surprising involvement with a supposedly exotic line of scholarship, then, would be shown by a rather antiquated tropical head-gear, nowadays hardly worn either by anthropologists or by anybody else, whether in the villages of whatever may be darkest Africa or in the small-business offices of North America.

**A STRONG BRAND**

The trouble, in other words, does not seem to be that anthropology is unknown to the outside world. We are perhaps actually more part of a popular imagination than most other disciplines. The problem is, rather, that what people think they know for a fact is wrong. For a long time, we maybe have thought of this as mildly irritating but not terribly important. I would argue that we may now be in turbulent times when we can ill afford to not take the matter seriously. We may not be able to put an end to all anthropology bashing, but we can try harder to be clear, and consistent, about how we want to be understood.

My concerns here are undoubtedly influenced by the fact that I have spent a fair amount of time, on and off over several decades, as a ground-level academic administrator, chairing my department (and also a couple of years running a small institute of advanced study). Academic organizations have their peculiarities, but in some ways a department head is much like a small business owner: trying to make ends meet, keeping the staff reasonably happy, attracting a flow of customers, and turning out a reasonably satisfactory line of products. That role is not always easy to combine with that of a scholar (although one had better try), but it may breed a certain sensitivity to what goes on at the interfaces between a discipline and at least some segments of the external environment.

In recent times, in large parts of the world, that environment has been importantly affected by the spread of the neoliberal culture complex. When it makes its way across continents, like other such complexes in history, it takes somewhat different shapes in different settings, as it interacts with what is already in place. The complex may acquire national characteristics, and in academia, its encounters with different disciplines work out in varied ways. It is a central assumption of neoliberalism, obviously, that “the market” generally offers a superior model for organizing activities and social relationships. Yet in Europe at least, where universities tend to be in one way or another closely tied to the state apparatus, it is conspicuously present in the reshaping of state management. Some of its manifestations actually seem less in evidence in North American universities, more pluralistic, under rather less-centralized control. Yet here, too, we find recent critical, and more or less pessimistic, assessments of what is happening to universities, under titles such as _The Last Professors_ (Donoghue 2008) and _Wannabe U_ (Tuchman 2009). And I hear the rumors of the effects of this culture complex on universities and the scholarly life in other regions of the world as well.²

Often it seems there is little insight, in whatever may be higher-level political decision making, into the varied modes of knowledge production in different scholarly fields as well as little curiosity about the unanticipated consequences of decisions. Generally, the politicians of neoliberal academia would not appear to attach any particular importance to the reproduction of disciplines or to the survival of departments. In these times, I would be worried that arguments for a decline of disciplines and for the superiority of trans-disciplinarity can turn into clichés that are made to serve as opportune alibis for politicians and administrators to do away with the autonomy of those clusters of intellectual activity that seem least profitable.

Perhaps it will eventually—I would hope sooner rather than later—be understood that universities cannot be run quite like businesses, that their multifaceted cultural roles demand some particular care, and that different disciplines may work according to different logics. Meanwhile, it seems particularly important that we take some care to cultivate an understanding of what anthropologists do that is readily understandable within the wider society and also acceptable to ourselves.

João de Pina-Cabral (2006), the Portuguese anthropologist, prominent on the European anthropological scene, has written about the problem at hand, provoked by one particular incident: the danger, at one time imminent although in the end not materializing, that anthropology in France, one of the old heartlands of the discipline, would be downgraded to a status as a subdivision of history in the national structure of research funding. Pina-Cabral’s conclusion was that the public image of the discipline is seriously out of date and does not serve it well. But this is not just a challenge to various European national anthropologies. In yet another recent book scrutinizing the U.S. university, Louis Menand, a regular contributor to the _New Yorker_ and a Harvard professor of English, notes that if today one asks anthropologists what their discipline is about you would be likely to get two types of answer. One answer is: Anthropology is the study of its own assumptions. The other answer is: Anthropology is whatever people in anthropology departments do. [2010:118]

I do not think this is good enough. Anthropology may have its more or less well-informed friends, even admirers, in some number of adjacent fields—science studies, law, medieval history, or wherever—each with their own notions of the peculiar character and value of the discipline. There may even be enthusiasts scattered far outside academia. But under the present circumstances, we may do well to offer a message that can also reach circles in which there may be no strong curiosity about what we do but that can still affect the circumstances of our lives: journalists, politicians, academic administrators... even school teachers, parents, voters. As I dwell on this issue here, I will perhaps at times be in danger...
of stating the obvious, but then it happens that I find what anthropologists say on such matters a little thoughtless and at worst counterproductive. Sometimes the obvious requires restating.

Perhaps provocatively, in drawing on a characteristic current vocabulary, I would argue that anthropology needs to cultivate a strong brand. Those who feel ill at ease with that term, thinking that in its crassness it sullies their noble scholarly pursuits, can perhaps just as well continue to call it “public image” or even just “identity,” but in times of not just neoliberal thought but also of media saturation and short attention spans, it may be that “brand” is a useful root metaphor, a word to think with in the world we live in. (These days, too, not only corporations or consumer goods are linked to brands but also for example cities and countries.) Brands should attract outsiders: customers, visitors, members of the public. At the same time, they should preferably offer a fully acceptable identity for whoever may count as insiders to reflect on and be inspired by.

It does not seem difficult to identify some criteria for a successful brand that could apply to the brand of an academic discipline as well. Preferably it should be quickly grasped and clearly understood. Academics, given to precise but not necessarily snappy definitions of their terms, may need to take note here. It is no good to formulate a brand in such a way that any innocent inquirer will lose interest and be halfway down the stairs before the reply is complete. The few words it needs to put together should be simple ones, understood by everybody. And the formulation, again, should not lend itself too easily to misinterpretation: remember again that striking catch phrase “the end of history?” and then Fukuyama’s later complaint about the world leaders who had failed to understand it.

Getting closer to specifics, I take it that one would be better off with a brand that is consistent and more or less equally acceptable, even attractive, to all the varied others one hopes to reach with it—insiders as well as outsiders. Consider some examples from the way we talk about anthropology. Menand, above, offers a version of our occasional, somewhat flippant conclusion that “anthropology is whatever anthropologists do.” In times when a number of disciplines may well be characterized by a great deal of internal variation and fuzzy boundaries, there could seem to be something to this, just as “history is whatever historians do” and “economics is whatever economists do.” Nevertheless, it is an insider joke, and it may be a little risky to take it outside our own circle. I do not think I would expose students to it (at least not immediately) for fear of confusing them further. Moreover, I would suspect that faculty deans, university rectors (or call them presidents, or vice-chancellors, in different national contexts), and ministers of higher education would neither feel well-instructed nor be terribly amused. Perhaps we had better get used to looking for what makes anthropology a reasonably coherent endeavor rather than emphasizing apparent incoherence.

There is also a certain intellectually rebellious streak in our discipline, which we may cherish and may well want to emphasize at times. This is an idea of anthropology as cultural critique, which certainly goes back at least to Malinowski and Margaret Mead and made a prominent comeback in the late 20th century. More recently yet, at a conference on teaching, I heard it affirmed that anthropology is a “subversive discipline.” Again, that may appeal to many of us and may attract some of the more independent thinkers among students. But I would not have recommended it, in the past or at present, as the best brand to take into negotiations with academic administrators or ministry officials who may nervously maximize order and predictability in their domains.

Rather more substantively, there has been some tendency to define anthropology centrally in terms of how we work: that is, in terms of field research or ethnography. Certainly there is something attractively concrete about this, yet we may feel that in the end it is not satisfactory as a central image of the discipline. Indeed, in the very title of his Radcliffe-Brown Lecture to the British Academy, Tim Ingold (2007) has asserted that “Anthropology is not Ethnography.” In passing, Ingold notes the extreme case of the lowly “ethnographic researcher,” “tasked with undertaking structured and semi-structured interviews with a selected sample of informants and analysing their contents with an appropriate software package, who is convinced that the data he collects are ethnographic simply because they are qualitative” (2007). This is surely not a particularly representative instance of what we usually take ethnography to be, but in any case Ingold shares with many other anthropologists a dislike of the inclination, in adjacent disciplines and disciplinoids (such as cultural studies), to assume that ethnography is all there is to anthropology. As an evolving body of thought and knowledge, anthropology cannot be reduced to a method—some sort of qualitative counterpart to statistics.

All the same, it is hardly helpful in the long run to come up only with brand formulations that suit some audiences but not at all others or formulations that most strongly emphasize what anthropology is not. This is certainly also still the problem with that widely accepted but outdated image that we took note of before: portraying the anthropologist either in “musty, forgotten archives” or in the jungle, wearing his pith helmet. We may reject that—but then when the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland commissions a volume to present a more current understanding of the discipline, it gets the title Exotic No More (MacClancy 2002). So, again, there is above all a negative statement, which could at worst be taken to mean that anthropology has given up its attempt to understand human lives across boundaries and is now all “anthropology at home.” The wide-ranging contents of the book in question show that this is not the case, but I would have preferred a more positive formulation up front.
A FOCUS ON DIVERSITY

What would I then offer as a viable brand for anthropology, at present and for any future that is at all foreseeable? It is here I come to this article’s title: “Diversity Is Our Business.” I will admit that this phrase is inspired by another one: a long time ago, the large U.S. corporation for which my brother-in-law worked as a young engineer used the slogan “Quality is our business—our only business.” I remember that my brother-in-law used to quote it with a wry detachment, as one may be wise to do with any slogan. Yet it may still have served the corporation reasonably well, for internal as well as external uses.

I want to work through some of the implications of pushing the scholarly and practical understanding of human diversity as anthropology’s brand. First of all, I think it is a valid claim that this is what the discipline is primarily about. Since the beginnings of the discipline, with its connections to natural history, we have indeed sought to document the variety of human life, even if for some time we applied this preoccupation more exclusively to what was geographically distant or “exotic.” It is a shared stance toward what is “out there,” not so affected by variations in theoretical orientations. Secondly, I think it identifies an important contribution to knowledge. Even if “diversity” could sound a little like “everything,” which might be a rather questionable specialty—and even comes uncomfortably close to “whatever anthropologists do”—the value of understanding diversity should very soon become clear when one contrasts it with that still-strong inclination to assume that what is familiar is universal or that modernity necessarily breeds uniformity. A study of diversity remains the best antidote to unthinking ethnocentrism.

With this, I believe, follows the opening of anthropology to the development of cultural critique, even to identifying as a “subversive discipline.” This line of effort may appeal more to some of us than to others, and I think the pursuit of it may well be left to individual choice. We should recognize, however, that although a primary identification with the study of diversity may sound less heroic, even a little bland, just about any claim that anthropology can have to unusual critical insight is in fact based on its special relationship to diversity, to the knowledge that other ways of thinking and acting are possible. It may be that, in the line of critical anthropology that developed in the later decades of the 20th century, especially in the United States, such specific inspiration was more mixed with critical theory from other sources and that one had become a bit more skeptical about the immediate usefulness of contrasts with the Samoans, the Kwakiutl, or other faraway people (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Yet there was still a sense that anthropology as cultural critique should be grounded in an ethnographic understanding of alternatives.

To what extent are we as individual scholars ready to identify the study of human diversity as our major concern? Possibly each one of us, when asked about our research interest, will spontaneously come up with some rather more specific answer: “Micronesian kinship,” “Latin American squatter settlements,” “software needs of small enterprises,” “Hausa praise singing,” or perhaps “the transnational impact of the Bollywood movie industry.” The problem of diversity as such, however we understand it, may not figure that prominently in our personal scholarly preoccupations. But what we should be aware of is that what all these remarkably different specialties add up to, in a collective intellectual enterprise, is that ever more encompassing, yet never ever complete, knowledge of human diversity. We all add our pieces to the very large jigsaw puzzle. And in that way, the understanding of the shared enterprise also offers us an umbrella for all our individual diversity, an umbrella that on the whole should allow us to get on with things.

Our inclination to think of ethnography, fieldwork, participant-observation, and qualitative analysis as central to the identity of the discipline can also, I believe, be seen as following from a primary concern with diversity. It is because the varied forms of thought and action cannot be assumed to be known, and because we do not take for granted that we know what we do not know, that we are ready to immerse ourselves, intensively and extensively, in ways of life and in documentary materials that are initially far from transparent. We do not fully trust methodologies that limit alternatives and obstruct our exploration of whatever may be unknown.

When the services of anthropologists are sought outside academia—be it by Microsoft, development NGOs, or the Pentagon—it also appears that it is mostly understandings of diversity that are in demand, whatever they are called; for example, “local knowledge” is a notion that in large part stands for this.

DIVERSITY UNDER SCRUTINY

Proclaiming diversity to be our business may thus allow us mostly to get on with what we do, while under an umbrella recognizable and not too puzzling to the world outside. It may provide enough room, too, for internal distinctions and cleavages—philosophical, social, political, stylistic—which may be of intense interest to members of the anthropological community but of little significance to others. Yet the brand is also likely to raise certain kinds of questions concerning our assumptions about diversity and our values, and even if not each one of us will be equally engaged in thinking about answers to these in some more organized manner, we can hardly all disregard them.

Probably we can agree that diversity is a notion that now figures much more prominently in public discourse than it did, say, a couple of decades ago. The fact that there is such a wider resonance is on the whole, I would think, one reason for pushing it as a brand key word. Clearly we cannot pretend to be the only people with an interest, even expertise, in diversity. I would not think, however, that within the division of organized scholarly knowledge, any other field can make an equally strong claim to it as a specialty. Yet if diversity has on the one hand turned somewhat fashionable,
and is on the other hand not entirely uncontroversial, there are also certain risks involved. We should try to stabilize and institutionalize our own understanding of it, hoping to avoid being dishearteningly stuck any time soon with the favorite flavor of yesteryear. Also we should have a sense of where there are grounds for contention. We may aim at mapping diversity and understanding it, but are we also inclined to celebrate it and to assume that it is limitless?

I like to think of anthropology as a cosmopolitan discipline—in the way I understand cosmopolitanism. I see the latter as a two-faced concept. On the one hand, there is a concern with humanity as a whole and its condition—a moral and at times political engagement with community, society, and citizenship at a more or less global level. On the other hand, cosmopolitanism involves an awareness, and often an appreciation, of diversity in meanings and meaningful forms. These two faces may appear separately from one another: one may often be a cosmopolitanism with a worried face, trying to come to grips with very large problems, while the other is perhaps more often a cosmopolitanism with a happy face, enjoying new sights, sounds, tastes, people. At best, however, I think there is an affinity between them, and it should not be hard to find this kind of double cosmopolitanism among anthropologists. (But then I doubt it would be a good idea to try and bring the word “cosmopolitanism” into the formulation of an effective public brand of the discipline, as it is so strikingly variable in its connotations—to exemplify, for some people it smells of Western elitism, to others cosmopolitanism is again something subversive, disloyal.)

Between the two faces of cosmopolitanism there may also be a certain tension, however, so a cosmopolitan stance should not entail an unconditional commitment to diversity as either pleasure or possibility. There is that engagement with shared humanity as well. I do not think we should just accept the fairly strong tendency in some contexts of public discourse, not least in recent times, to leave diversity unexamined as something self-evidently good and valuable. Let us, rather, draw on whatever expertise we have to be a bit more intellectually hard-nosed, a little less soft-hearted. We should try to clarify the issues surrounding diversity as we have a chance, publicly or among ourselves, to elaborate on our brand.

On the one hand, it seems to me that the most basic argument for diversity, or one that tends at least on a preliminary basis to work out as such, is a kind of human rights argument: a respect for people’s rights to be who they are, and think and do as they choose, within some limits of social justice and concern for the corresponding rights of others. This is an argument that gets complicated by a conflation of individual rights with collective rights; without going into that issue now, I will just say that I have primarily individual rights in mind. Beyond that, I have attempted elsewhere to bring together and make explicit other more tangible arguments for diversity that one can find. I will not repeat them here, only note that I came up with seven, all of which, I believe, are in some need of further discussion and qualification (Hannerz 1996:56–64). On the other hand, I think it is as obvious to anthropologists as to most other people that diversity, in the sense of difference, is sometimes a nuisance, involving misunderstanding and conflict. If diversity is our business, this part of it is also included.

In this context, I would like to note that while anthropologists have gone about studying diversity in their way, since the latter decades of the 20th century there has also been a growth of fields that specialize precisely in dealing with diversity as something concretely problematic, fields of “intercultural communication” and “diversity management.” I once referred to the former somewhat facetiously as “the culture shock prevention industry” (Hannerz 1990:245). That may suggest the rather skeptical, and even ironic, stance of academic anthropologists to this mostly applied field of consultancy and training: to the extent that we pay attention to it at all, we have our doubts about both its theories and its practices. Nonetheless, it may be that if we do make diversity our business, we should take the public demand for knowledge and insight in this area seriously and consider further how we can meet that demand in our way.

There is also that other very big question about how far human diversity stretches. Indeed, the suggestion that anthropology is the study of human diversity is not quite the entire story. At the level of ethnographic work, the preoccupation with diversity may be most noticeable. Yet from early in its intellectual history, anthropology has also had a marked interest in the limits of diversity: in human nature, in “the psychic unity of mankind,” or whatever the formulations may have been. Such concerns have been stronger in some periods than others. Almost half a century ago, in his brief but elegant overview of what was then recent (mostly U.S.) anthropology, Eric Wolf referred to “a pendulum swing in anthropological thinking” between “an interest in the gamut of human variability as expressed in the multiplicity of human cultures” and the attempt to define “some underlying reality beneath the ever changing surface of human phenomena . . . the common blueprint of the human animal” (1964:33–34). That pendulum continues to swing, kept in motion by shifting theoretical and practical stimuli, although it would still seem that in anthropology (mostly unlike other fields of knowledge) the search for unity or uniformity is fundamentally an endeavor carried out in recognition of diversity rather than in disregard of it—a search, rather than a facile assumption.

At present, too, it seems to me necessary that our claim to expertise on diversity also includes an interest in the limits of diversity. Understandings of these limits must continue to be taken as tentative and subject to change, not least in a dialogue with those scholars who study human beings primarily as biological beings. Clearly there has been a great deal of activity in this field recently. As social and cultural anthropologists, we may not always have been very impressed by the proposals of early sociobiologists or later evolutionary psychologists, but let us not respond to arguments in
This area only with a dogmatism of our own. Generally, the credibility of our claim to expertise in the field of diversity should rest not on premature attempts to establish a consensus party line on critical issues but, rather, on providing an arena for the best-informed discussion of them (Bloch 2005:1–19; Eriksen 2007).

CULTURE: A CONTESTED CONCEPT

I have waited until this point to explicitly bring the concept of culture into my argument. It is probably clear that just about every time that I have referred to diversity, I might as well have said “cultural diversity.” But then culture is a contested concept, forever in the public arena, and for the last 20 years or so inside anthropology. Consequently, opinions may differ on whether it should be up front in a presentation of our brand. The debate on the topic may no longer be so intensive within anthropology, and it may have come more or less to an end without being resolved one way or other.9

I can see the reasons why some colleagues may feel ill at ease with some of the uses of the culture concept, especially in the essentialist, not to say fundamentalist, varieties employed by political extremists in public life. My own view, however, which I have already elaborated more fully in other contexts, is reformist, rather than abolitionist, and fairly pragmatic (Hannerz 1996:30–43, 1999). Undoubtedly we can manage to find ways of avoiding just about any concept if we try hard enough, but for my own purposes I do find it practical to use “culture” and “cultural” to refer to the fact that human beings are learning animals, using meanings to which they have access through their interactions with other humans. Such a usage can be processual in its attention to stability as well as change and does not assume internal uniformity or sharply bounded units. It does not have to succumb to “culturalism,” either, in the sense of exaggerating the importance of beliefs, values, or habits at the expense of factors of power or material circumstances. The goal must certainly be to analyze the relationships among culture, power, and materialities—and this should not be an impossible task. As I remember an old psychological finding, human beings are supposed to be able to keep as many as seven different things in mind at the same time, so it would not seem unreasonable to ask of anthropologists that they try to handle two or three simultaneously.

Then, obviously, the question of what we do with the culture concept has a particular connection to our concern with our brand, our public image. It seems to me that at least in some circles within the wider public, “culture” has been understood as an area in which anthropologists have some expertise and can thus speak with a certain intellectual authority. If we stop using the concept, I doubt that this will have any particular effect outside the discipline. Probably very few people will notice, and we may simply leave more room for uses that we find unacceptable. It may just turn into yet another case of anthropologists trying to define themselves by telling the world what they are not, what they do not do. I think whistle-blowing, and trying to propagate our own view of culture, is a better strategy. We may remember from fairly long ago the line “whenever I hear the word ‘culture,’ I reach for my revolver.” Precisely which leading figure in Nazi Germany used it first, and exactly what the original word formulation was, may be somewhat hazy. But I am afraid if this speaker had been a certain kind of present-day anthropologist, he may have picked up his gun only to shoot himself in the foot.

It should follow from what I have said that I do not believe that a claim to a special concern with diversity necessarily implies any single stand with regard to what in public life in large parts of the world has in recent decades been labeled as “multiculturalism,” whether as a politics of identity or as government policy. Such multiculturalism involves one kind of claim or other of taking diversity into account, but it can be critically examined with varied results. There is certainly some tendency to confuse cultural diversity with multiculturalism, but it is important to distinguish between diversity as a fact and multiculturalism, as an “-ism,” as a policy, program, or ideology for the organization of diversity.8 And again, it would appear useful if anthropology could provide a scholarly arena, accessible to the interested public, for debate over relevant concepts and realities. Rather unfortunately, such debate, particularly at a theoretical level, has mostly been carried out within the confines of political philosophy (see, e.g., Barry 2001; Benhabib 2002; Kelly 2002; Kymlicka 1995; Parekh 2000; Taylor 1992).

THE EMERGENT—AND COMPARISONS

Here is another consideration: Does a branding of anthropology as a discipline specializing in diversity really take us safely away from the public image that we reject, that of being a discipline only of the past, antiquarian and itself antiquated? There is the possibility that diversity itself is seen as something mostly declining, even vanishing. Fukuyama’s “end of history,” with its global triumph of liberal democracy and whatever supposedly would belong in the same package, could perhaps equally well be read as an end of diversity. Over the years illustrious anthropologists have come up with formulations that point more or less in that direction. Again, there are those lines of Malinowski’s with which this article began. Nearly 80 years later, Clifford Geertz suggested that “we may be faced with a world in which there simply aren’t any more headhunters, matrilinealists, or people who predict the weather from the entrails of a pig” (2000:68).

It is very likely that the range of cultural variation in the world is no longer what it has been. Insofar as anthropology has an interest in keeping a record of all the kinds of more or less patterned thoughts, activities, and relationships that have at one time or other occurred in some corner of humanity, we may indeed take an interest in the past and in documenting now what may soon disappear as a part of ongoing human life. Not so long ago, this was what the notion of “urgent anthropology” usually referred to, and for some of us it may still be a priority.
We may remember, too, that long-established tendency in anthropology to place the Other somehow in another time, which Johannes Fabian (1983) criticized in what has become one of the discipline’s more recent classics. In any case, we must now insist that our business is diversity in the past, present, and future. And our present present, of course, is not that timeless “ethnographic present” of the past but indeed this particular period in the flow of history that does not end. That means we must resist those simplistic narratives of global homogenization that keep showing up in new versions and attend to the sources of resilience in human modes of thought and practice that keep much diversity rather stable. To use the plural form “modernities” is to insist that there is diversity in modernity.

I can have much respect and even intellectual affection for those colleagues who devote their labors to ever closer views of the cultural minutiae of the longue durée, or of vanishing tradition. Yet I think we should also take some special interest in the way that new cultural forms keep developing, bringing about new diversity. I see a growing interest in anthropology in the future, and in ideas about the future.9 No doubt it is wise to abstain from claims to predictive powers; the anthropology of the future can only be a subjunctive genre. Yet I would propose—as do, for example, Michael Fischer (2003:37–38) and Bill Maurer (2005)—that our methodological inclination toward ethnography, toward open-ended encounters with a potential for serendipitous discoveries, should be of particular value in studying what is emergent. Rather than engaging with diversity mostly by looking backward, anthropology can be in the avant-garde of describing what is growing and what may be coming. Does not the recent interest in such different areas as cultural blending (hybridity, creolization), the varieties of virtuality, and science studies all demonstrate that much diversity is alive and well around us and ahead of us?

Making diversity the keyword of our brand could also have implications for the kind of writing we do. There has been much debate over writing in anthropology recently, but in large part, recent critiques, and resulting experiments, have been aimed at an internal audience made up of colleagues and forever intellectually news-hungry graduate students. Certainly this has been one of the sources of vitality in the discipline, but mostly such efforts do not reach out. It may be that in a very large national academic system—notably the U.S. one—with a considerable degree of autonomy, in which the attention and esteem of colleagues are what matters most in continued career mobility, there is a particular logic to the concentration on internalist writing. Generally, with a concern for the public image of anthropology, we should think of other styles of writing as well (Eriksen 2006; Waterston and Vesperi 2009). Surely there is still room for much experimentation here. In the context of a foregrounding of diversity, however, I would like to put in a word for the possibilities of comparison.

It has been one of the recurrent ways of describing anthropology to say that it is comparative, which in fact is mostly another way of saying that it is concerned with diversity, but the fact is that not very much anthropology in recent times has been explicitly comparative—which ends up being merely another variety of saying what anthropology is not, or not quite, or no longer. Perhaps for a generation or two now, it seems to me, whether they know it or not, anthropologists have been in a silent battle with the ghost of George Peter Murdock (e.g., 1949) and the style of comparison connected with cross-cultural surveys and the Human Relations Area Files. That kind of comparative work rather soon turned out to involve serious epistemological problems, and it was probably just as important that its dry abstractedness had very little general intellectual and esthetic appeal to most anthropologists. But then comparisons can be done in a great many ways, and I sense that there is again a wider growing interest in their potential, not least for portraying diversity, explaining it, and discussing its implications as well as for identifying whatever unity or order may underlie diversity (Fox and Gingrich 2002; Moore 2005).

A more widespread use of comparison might have one particular consequence for our work. As I said before, in building our overall picture of human diversity, as a collective enterprise, we tend to add to it our own individual pieces without necessarily having so much of an immediate concern with the whole. Now there are ways of being just as individually engaged in comparative work, if we can draw on varied research experiences of our own, perhaps in different groups, in different places. Michael Herzfeld (2001b), for example, has offered an account of his own reflexive globetrotting between the Mediterranean and Thailand.10 Further back, there is the well-known instance of Geertz’s Islam Observed (1968), set in Indonesia and Morocco. Often, however, we may need to draw on the work of other anthropologists, other ethnographers, to accomplish comparisons. If we think of ethnography as a highly personal expression—much more like art than science—or if we somehow see it as intellectual property where the rights of use cannot be transferred, comparison may be in trouble. No doubt there will be varied preferences within the community of anthropologists here as well, but on the whole I do not think the obstacles to a more effective sharing of our ethnographic resources must remain insurmountable. What of the writings of our colleagues can be used in comparisons, and how, is more likely something that we can decide on after close critical reading rather than on the basis of overall assumptions or proclamations.

**CONCLUSION: FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES**

Finally, then, what might be the future for diversity as our business, what kind of receptivity can we hope to cultivate for this brand? Again, we may not be in the forecasting business, and one should not underestimate the ability of various segments of the public to stick to old, established, and undesirable stereotypes: the colonialist in the pith helmet,
the arrogant bumbler, the profligate spender of ordinary people’s tax money.

Let us also note the signs of success, however, which do show up in varied places. I return one more time to Fukuyama, who is still a globally prominent public intellectual. As I have said, one might suspect that his “end of history” scenario could also be understood to entail an end of diversity. But no, that seems no longer, or not entirely, to be the way Fukuyama has it. On the website of the School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University, where he has recently had a leading role, I find him making the point that “most of what is truly useful for policy is context-specific, culture bound and non-generalizable” (Fukuyama 2003). He complains that the typical article now appearing in the American Political Science Review contains much complex-looking mathematics, the sole function of which is often to formalize a behavioral rule that everyone with common sense understands must be true. “What is missing,” argues Fukuyama, “is any deep knowledge about the subtleties and nuances of how foreign societies work, knowledge that would help us better predict the behavior of political actors, friendly and hostile, in the broader world.”

As I followed the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, too, I perused the statements that candidates were making about their foreign policy views and plans. “Today, understanding foreign cultures is not a luxury but a strategic necessity,” argued Senator John McCain (2007:24); more concretely, he proposed setting up a new agency patterned after the World War II-era Office of Strategic Services (OSS), which could draw together “specialists in unconventional warfare, civil affairs, and psychological warfare; covert-action operators; and experts in anthropology, advertising, and other relevant disciplines from inside and outside government.” That old Office of Strategic Services, we may remember from the history of anthropology, was where Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, and others were active in World War II. Of course, we may worry about the suggested company.

And then again, there was Senator Obama. At a public meeting during the primary campaign in New Hampshire, according to one news website, a questioner made passing mention of a famous anthropologist, and Obama’s response was that “the Margaret Mead reference I am always hip to” (Shapiro 2007). The senator went on to say that his country’s policy makers had a problem with understanding non-Western cultures:

> This is a chronic problem in Washington. It has to do with our 30-second attention span. You want to get to know a country and figure out what are the interests and who are the players. You can’t parachute in. We don’t have good intelligence on them. And we’re basically making a series of decisions in the blind. And that is dangerous for us. [Shapiro 2007]

Since then, we all have become aware that Obama’s late mother had actually earned a doctorate in anthropology at the University of Hawai‘i. In the recently published version of her dissertation, which is in large part about Javanese blacksmiths, we can learn that these, like their colleagues here and there in the world, are understood to have certain mystical powers; the master smith’s role “overlaps with that of the magician, ritual specialist, puppet master, poet, priest, and even musician” (Dunham 2009:43). We can perhaps wish that some of these unusual powers have rubbed off on the ethnographer’s son. He needs them in the office into which he has moved, and even if he does not he takes up his competitor’s suggestion of a new-style OSS, we must also hope that he uses his powers with good intelligence.12

Meanwhile, as the Fortune Small Business story on Bill Gates and his pygmy hunters concludes, “anthropology marches on.”

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NOTES

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1. In his lively autobiography, An Academic Skating on Thin Ice, Worsley notes about this paper that “I was wrong—it didn’t die at all” (2008:154).

2. The growing body of anthropological commentary on neoliberalism in universities, and the related notion of audit culture, includes, for example, Brenneis (2009), Strathern (2000), and Wright and Rabo (2010).

3. I have also seen a book review by the Archbishop of Canterbury with a title describing Virgin Mary as “a global brand” (Williams 2009).

4. But note here also Marshall Sahlin’s comment: “Some Cultural Studies types seem to think that anthropology is nothing but ethnography. Better the other way around: ethnography is anthropology, or it is nothing” (1993:9).

5. The literature on cosmopolitanism has grown enormously, in anthropology and adjacent fields, especially since the 1990s; for my own point of view toward the recognition and appreciation of diversity, see Hannerz 1990, and toward the interrelations of cultural and political dimensions, see Hannerz 2004.

6. I believe the dissertation by Dahlén (1997) remains one of the most illuminating overviews of the field of “intercultural communication” from an anthropological perspective.

7. Among the enduring references in a more critical vein here are Abu-Lughod (1991) and Fox and King (2002); Brumann (1999) takes a more culture-friendly view. For a thorough overview of the uses of the culture concept through the history...
of anthropology until the present, see Fischer (2007); and for useful discussion of the spread of culture concepts in academic as well as popular contexts, see Breidenbach and Nyiri (2009).

8. For one case where diversity as a political term is largely identified with late-20th-century North American expressions of multiculturalism, see Wood 2003. This author, identified on the back cover as a professor of anthropology at Boston University, recognizes that “diversity” can be understood in other ways as well, but the book is largely devoted to connecting it to identity politics, political correctness, and so forth.


10. This kind of work by scholars working alone has recently found new expression in multisite research projects, which usually have a comparative dimension (Hannerz 2003b).

11. For some very appreciative reminiscences of anthropologist and mother Stanley Ann Dunham by a colleague who knew her well, see Dowd (2009).

12. New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd sees it as something like “diversity management”: “Barack Obama grew up learning how to slip in and out of different worlds—black and white, foreign and American, rich and poor. The son of an anthropologist, he developed a lot of ‘tricks,’ as he put it, training himself to be a close observer of human nature, figuring out what others needed so he could get where he wanted to go” (2009).

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