Kant, ‘anthropology’ and the new human universal

Emergent world society is the new human universal – not an idea, but the fact of our shared occupation of the planet crying out for new principles of association. A close reading of Kant’s *Anthropology* leads to an emphasis on anthropology as a form of education for subjective individuals who share the object world with the rest of humanity. Knowledge of society must be personal and moral before it is defined by laws imposed from above. Anthropology might then be a self-learning tool for anyone who cares about making a world society fit for humanity as a whole.

**Key words** anthropology, education, Kant, personal, universal

The distinctive feature of our age is that mankind as a whole is on the way to becoming fully conscious of itself. (James 1989 [1938])

By ‘anthropology’ I refer here not to the academic institution but to a human teleology in James’s sense. We must improve our self-knowledge as individuals and as a species, especially the relationship between the two. Such a relationship is mediated by a bewildering variety of associations and identities, which have been the prime focus of anthropology conceived of as a social science. What interests me, and I believe the vast bulk of humanity, is how each of us relates to the whole and only secondarily how social connections mediate that relationship.

This version of anthropology has its origin in the Enlightenment’s attempt to build democracy on a foundation of systematic knowledge of human nature, of what all human beings have in common, regardless of the arbitrary social inequalities under which most people labour. Its apogee was Kant’s late work during the 1780s and 1790s, when he published the first book on ‘anthropology’ as such (Kant 2006 [1798]). The states that had partitioned the world between themselves were bent on war; yet he posed the question of how humanity might construct a ‘perpetual peace’ beyond their boundaries, based on principles that we all share (Kant 2003 [1795]). This ‘cosmopolitan’ society of world citizens was a necessary bridge to the exercise of human reason at the species level. Kant held that humanity’s hardest task was the administration of

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justice worldwide. In the meantime, anthropology must explore the cognitive, aesthetic and ethical universals on which such an idea of human unity might be founded. The categorical imperative to be good (‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’) provided a moral link between individuals and this emergent inclusive order.

Kant’s cosmopolitan project

Immanuel Kant started out as a geography lecturer in the Baltic port of Königsberg. He published his first book at the age of 57, the Critique of pure reason (2008 [1781]), and it marked his arrival as a philosopher. Kant is the source for the notion that society may be as much an expression of individual subjectivity as a collective force out there. Copernicus solved the problem of the movement of the heavenly bodies by having the spectator revolve, while they were at rest, instead of them revolve around the spectator. Kant extended this achievement for physics into metaphysics. In his Preface to the Critique of pure reason, he writes:

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects . . . but what if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge? (Kant 2008 [1781]: 22)

In order to understand the world, we must begin not with the empirical existence of objects, but with the reasoning embedded in our experience and in all the judgements we have made. This is to say that the world is inside each of us as much as it is out there. Our task is to unite the two poles as subjective individuals who share the object world with the rest of humanity. Knowledge of society must be personal and moral before it is defined by laws imposed on us from above.

Kant published Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view in 1798. The book was based on lectures he had given at the university since 1772. His aim was to attract the general public to an independent discipline whose name he more than anyone contributed to academic life. Remarkably, histories of anthropology have rarely mentioned this work, perhaps because the discipline has evolved so far away from Kant’s original premises. But it would pay us to take his Anthropology seriously, if only for its resonance with our own times.

Shortly before, Kant wrote To perpetual peace: a philosophical sketch (1795). The last quarter of the 18th century saw its own share of ‘globalisation’ – the American and French revolutions, the Napoleonic wars, the rise of British industry and the international movement to abolish slavery. Kant knew that coalitions of states were gearing up for war, yet he responded to this sense of the world coming closer together by proposing how humanity might form society as world citizens beyond the boundaries of states. He held that ‘cosmopolitan right’, the basic right of all world citizens, should rest on conditions of universal hospitality, that is, on the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else’s territory. In other words, we should be free to go wherever we like in the world, since it belongs to all of us equally.

The peoples of the earth have entered in varying degree into a universal community, and it has developed to the point where a violation of rights in
one part of the world is felt everywhere. The idea of a cosmopolitan right is not fantastic and overstrained; it is a necessary complement to the unwritten code of political and international right, transforming it into a universal right of humanity. (Kant 2003 [1795]: 18)

This confident sense of an emergent world order, written over 200 years ago, can now be seen as the high point of the liberal revolution, before it was overwhelmed by its twin offspring, industrial capitalism and the nation-state.

Earlier Kant wrote an essay, ‘Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose’, which included the following propositions:

1 In man (as the only rational creature on earth) those natural faculties which aim at the use of reason shall be fully developed in the species, not in the individual.
2 The means that nature employs to accomplish the development of all faculties is the antagonism of men in society, since this antagonism becomes, in the end, the cause of a lawful order of this society.
3 The latest problem for mankind, the solution of which nature forces us to seek, is the achievement of a civil society which is capable of administering law universally.
4 This problem is both the most difficult and the last to be solved by mankind.
5 A philosophical attempt to write a universal world history according to a plan of nature which aims at perfect civic association of mankind must be considered to be possible and even as capable of furthering nature’s purpose. (1997 [1784]: 42–5)

Our world is much more socially integrated than two centuries ago and its economy is palpably unequal. Histories of the universe we inhabit do seem to be indispensable to the construction of institutions capable of administering justice worldwide. The task of building a global civil society for the 21st century is an urgent one and anthropological visions should play their part in that.

The Scots philosopher David Hume once paid Kant a visit and asked him why he never left home. ‘People come to Königsberg’, was the reply, ‘you came to Königsberg’. Sometimes, it seems, the spectator may be at rest while the heavens turn. Immanuel Kant died at the age of 80 in 1804, the year of Haiti’s independence after the only successful slave revolution in world history (James 1989 [1938]; see also Wardle 1995).

This then was the context for the publication of Kant’s Anthropology. He elsewhere summarised ‘philosophy in the cosmopolitan sense of the word’ as four questions:

What can I know?
What should I do?
What may I hope for?
What is a human being?

The first question is answered in metaphysics, the second in morals, the third in religion and the fourth in anthropology. (Kant 2006 [1798]: xii)

But the first three questions ‘relate to anthropology’, he said, and might be subsumed under it. Kant conceived of anthropology as an empirical discipline, but also as a means
of moral and cultural improvement. It was thus both an investigation into human nature and, more especially, into how to modify it, as a way of providing his students with practical guidance and knowledge of the world. He intended his lectures to be ‘popular’ and of value in later life. Above all, the *Anthropology* was to contribute to the progressive political task of uniting world citizens by identifying the source of their ‘cosmopolitan bonds’. The book thus moves between vivid anecdotes and Kant’s most sublime vision as a bridge from the everyday to horizon thinking.

If for Kant the two divisions of anthropology were physiological and pragmatic, he preferred to concentrate on the latter – ‘what the human being as a free actor can and should make of himself’. This is based primarily on observation, but it also involves the construction of moral rules. The book has two parts, the first and longer being on empirical psychology and divided into sections on cognition, aesthetics and ethics. Part 2 is concerned with the character of human beings at every level from the individual to the species, seen from both the inside and the outside. Anthropology is the practical arm of moral philosophy. It does not explain the metaphysics of morals, which are categorical and transcendent; but it is indispensable to any interaction involving human agents. It is thus ‘pragmatic’ in a number of senses: it is ‘everything that pertains to the practical’, popular (as opposed to academic) and moral in that it is concerned with what people should do, with their motives for action.

Kant acknowledges that anthropological science has some way to go methodologically. People act self-consciously when they are being observed and it is often hard to distinguish between self-conscious action and habit. For this reason, he recommends as aids ‘world history, biographies and even plays and novels’. The latter, while being admittedly inventions, are often based on close observation of real behaviour and add to our knowledge of human beings. He thought that the main value of his book lay in its systematic organisation, so that readers could incorporate their experience into it and develop new themes appropriate to their own lives.

Historians and philosophers are divided between those who find the book marginal to Kant’s thought and those for whom it is just muddled and banal. The anthropologists have ignored it altogether. In a rare acknowledgement, Daniel Miller prefers to see Kant as the general inspiration for a focus on morality that comes to anthropology via Durkheim and Boas:

> It is perhaps unfortunate that Kant wrote a book (2006) actually called *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. This book, the most popular of his works in his day, may be considered as somewhat trite and amongst his least effective philosophical endeavours. The claim that Kant had a major influence upon the discipline comes from elsewhere in his corpus (e.g. the *Critique of Pure Reason*). It is Kant’s and more generally the enlightenment’s understanding of morality as based on reason that became central to anthropological work. (Miller 2010: 415)

While this is undoubtedly true of academic anthropology in the 20th century, it need not be so for the century to come. As Miller points out, Kant’s *Anthropology* was a best-seller for its time: the first print run of 2,000 copies sold out in a couple of years. A more constructive reading of his book might help us to move beyond a national frame to embrace a vision of anthropology more suited to participation in the embryonic world society of our day.

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Anthropology and the new human universal

World society today resembles nothing so much as the 18th-century *ancien régime* that Kant had every reason to believe had been abolished by revolution. Now a rich, aging white minority inured to luxuries unimaginable two centuries ago presides over masses whose passivity is measured by their lack of spending power (Hart 2002). The institutional legacy of 5,000 years of agrarian civilisation, Childe’s (1954) ‘urban revolution’, still weighs heavily with us. The traditional recipe for managing inequality, to inject as much distance as possible between rich and poor, is contradicted by a world being drawn closer together by the digital revolution in communications. Yet, rather than embrace as inevitable its demographic replacement by the young, darker, poor masses, the dominant white elite frantically erects further barriers against entry whose principle is *apartheid* generalised to a world scale.

The opponents of globalisation, who resist the new mobility enjoyed by capital by making a myopic appeal to national interest, participate unwittingly in this rearguard action to preserve the privileges of the western nations. If Marx showed us how the social relations of production act as so many fetters on the development of the productive forces, these today take the form of territorial states seeking to maintain established privilege by constraining the movement of people, goods, money and information in a world society that is both more integrated and more divided. Transnational capitalism, complemented by grassroots democratic movements of all kinds, today leads the way in challenging old national and regional structures, much as the rise of national capitalism underpinned liberal revolutions in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Academic anthropology is not well-equipped to inform participation in such historical processes, mainly because its cultural relativism reflects the dominant nation-state structures of the 20th century. How then might each of us find a more secure foundation for self-knowledge as individuals and as a species? Kant held that the political project of building a just world society was necessary for human development in the long run. Anthropology, however, reflects more closely his vision of individual subjectivity and is best thought of as a means to that end, as a branch of humanist education. This requires us to transcend the barriers erected by 20th-century civilisation between each of us as a subjective personality and society as an impersonal object. After all, what room did the 20th century’s anonymous institutions – states, capitalist markets, science – leave for personal agency, beyond the right to spend whatever bits of money we can lay our hands on?

The world must be imaginatively reduced in scale and our subjectivity expanded, in order for a meaningful link to be established between the two. Once people achieved this by praying to God and many still do. Works of fiction – movies, novels and plays – fill the gap for those of us who do not pray. We need to feel more at home in the world, to resist alienation, and that means embracing movement rather than fixture in place. Each of us embarks on a journey outward into the world and inward into the self. Society is mysterious to us because we have lived in it and it now dwells inside us at a level that is not ordinarily visible from the perspective of everyday life. All the places we have lived in are sources of introspection concerning our relationship to society; and one method for understanding the world is to make an ongoing practice of trying to synthesise these varied experiences. If a person would have an identity – would be one thing, one self – this requires trying to make out of fragmented social experience a more coherent whole, a world in other words as singular as the self.

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Emergent world society is the new human universal – not an idea, but the fact of our shared occupation of the planet crying out for new principles of association. By this I mean making a world where all people can live together, not the imposition of principles that suit some powerful interests at the expense of the rest. The next universal will be unlike its predecessors, the Christian and bourgeois versions through which the West sought to dominate or replace the cultural particulars that organise people’s lives everywhere. The main precedent for such an approach to discovering our common humanity is great literature, which achieves universality through going deeply into particular personalities, relations and places. Ethnography does the same in its own way. The new universal will not just tolerate cultural particulars, but will be founded on knowing that true human community can only be realised through them.

There are two prerequisites for being human: we must each learn to be self-reliant to a high degree and to belong to others, merging our identities in a bewildering variety of social relationships. Much of modern ideology emphasises how problematic it is to be both self-interested and mutual, to be economic as well as social, we might say. When culture is set up to expect a conflict between the two, it is hard to be both. Yet the two sides are often inseparable in practice and some societies, by encouraging private and public interests to coincide, have managed to integrate them more effectively than ours. One premise of the new human universal will thus be the unity of self and society. If learning to be two-sided is the means of becoming human, then the lesson is apparently hard to learn.

We cannot assume that identification of anthropology with the academy in the last century will continue in the next. It is now harder for self-designated guilds to control access to professional knowledge. People have other ways of finding out for themselves, rather than submit to academic hierarchy. And there are many agencies out there competing to give them what they want, whether through journalism, tourism or all the self-learning possibilities afforded by the internet. Popular resistance to the power of experts is essentially moral, in that people insist on restoring a personal dimension to human knowledge. Anthropologists’ current dependence on academic bureaucracy leaves us highly vulnerable to such developments.

‘Anthropology’ is indispensable to the formation of world society in the coming century. The academic discipline could play a part in that; but the prospects are not good, given its prevalent localism and anti-universalism. A Kantian anthropology would focus on whatever we need to know about humanity as a whole if we want to build a more equal world fit for everyone. Such a usage could be embraced by students of history, sociology, geography, political economy, philosophy and literature, as well as by some anthropologists. Many disciplines might contribute without being exclusively devoted to the project. The idea of ‘development’ played a similar role in the last half-century.

Kant attempted to address the emergence of world society directly. He conceived of anthropology primarily as a form of humanist education; and this contrasts starkly with the emphasis on scientific research outputs in today’s universities. We could also emulate his ‘pragmatic’ approach, a personal programme of lifetime learning with the aim of developing practical knowledge of the world. Kant recommended, apart from systematic observation of life around us, that we study world history, biographies and even plays and novels. He sought a method for integrating individual subjectivity with the moral construction of world society. World history, as practised by the likes of Jack Goody (1976) and Eric Wolf (1982), is indispensable to any anthropology worthy of the name today. The method of biography (Mintz 1960) is particularly well-suited to

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the study of self and society; and I suspect that it will become more commonplace in future.

The rapid development of global communications today contains within its movement a far-reaching transformation of world society. ‘Anthropology’ in some form is one of the intellectual traditions best suited to make sense of it. The academic seclusion of the discipline, its passive acquiescence to bureaucracy, is the chief obstacle preventing us from grasping this historical opportunity. We cling to our revolutionary commitment to joining the people, but have forgotten what it was for or what else is needed, if we are to succeed in building a universal society. The internet offers a wonderful chance to open up the flow of knowledge and information. Rather than obsessing over how we can control access to what we write, which means cutting off the mass of humanity almost completely from our efforts, we need to figure out new interactive forms of engagement that span the globe and to make the results of our work available to everyone. Ever since the internet went public and the World Wide Web was invented, I have made online self-publishing and interaction the core of my anthropological practice (Hart 2009). And recently I have stumbled into what may turn out to be the most powerful vehicle for this project yet: the Open Anthropology Cooperative (http://openanthcoop.ning.com).

It matters less that an academic guild should retain its monopoly of access to knowledge than that ‘anthropology’ should be taken up by a broad intellectual coalition for whom the realisation of a new human universal – a world society fit for humanity as a whole – is a matter of urgent personal concern.

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References

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