

Topic of the GAA Conference, 1st-4th October 2007

**Questions of dispute –  
On the relationship of empirical research and anthropological theory in the  
beginning 21st century**

The dispute between an interpretive and an explanatory, hypothesis-examining anthropology has not really been settled. It rather has been overshadowed by a succession of so-called *turns* (linguistic turn, literary turn, cultural turn, iconic turn) and their respective counter-movements. Also, excitements over postmodern approaches have worn off – without a result that can easily be identified. The various adjectives – interpretive, positivist, constructionist, postmodern – have become mutual sweeping judgments without much expertise and disposition to distinguish.

Small conflicts continue to smolder below the surface, however. Many of them are about the question of whether a representational or a performative idiom is preferable. And in a tough battle – like raising research funds, filling positions, testimonials of qualification – the unchanged fundamental question of the validity of anthropological statements comes to the fore. But there still is no concord regarding the answer to this question. Do anthropological statements have to be falsifiable? If yes: what exactly does this mean? In the debate on principles regarding the relation of empirical research and anthropological theory (which will probably never be final) it is rewarding to determine, from time to time, the state of the debate, in order to be able to dispute more fruitfully. Presently, there are several occasions to do so.

(1.) While anthropology – at least some of its variants – has developed a remarkable competence in issues of reflexivity, part of its old authority has been lost. Even though the dissolution of the old authority can be seen as a specific success of the last decades, many people now regret that anthropology in Germany is hardly ever considered as a relevant or competent authority in public disputes. While anthropology gave voice to the self-representations of other cultures, the scholars' courage to express insights that only an outsider can have, has been eroded. At the

same time, fewer and fewer people have faith in the superiority of western life forms and these doubts have produced an anxiety over the discipline's authority to analyze the knowledge of other societies. What do these developments mean? With which theoretical positions are they connected?

(2.) During the last decades some of the *objects of research* in anthropology have radically changed. This cannot completely be attributed to the fact that the world has changed and human beings live differently. Rather, in its own interest, anthropology turns to new objects of study, such as organizations, media, financial markets, or to the study of sciences and technology. How is this new orientation connected with theoretical considerations, and how are these connected with new forms of empiricism (research upward, multi-local ethnography, ethnography at a distance, cyber anthropology)?

(3.) Especially the sweeping success of anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s (as acknowledged by Geertz and others) resulted in the active adoption of ethnographic methods in the neighbouring disciplines of anthropology and their further development in these disciplines. How do these developments feed back into anthropology? What is the role of cultural difference in anthropological methodology today? How does this differ from ethnographic sociology? Do these methodical differences have repercussions in anthropology, too?

(4.) Since some time that portion of anthropologists who study other, foreign cultures is continuously declining. In a worldwide perspective, most anthropologists do research at home. Even though, the specific anthropological perspective often remains a central instrument of anthropological work. How, in researching one's own culture, does methodical self-alienation relate to the traditional *anthropological experience of the Other*?

(5.) Knowledge of one's own form of life is increasingly understood as *intellectual property* of groups – who claim exclusive rights to self-representation.

Anthropology cannot keep up one of its central legitimations any more – to give a voice to the voiceless. Anthropology is rather suspected of getting round the rights of the people studied, or at least to profit by it without giving something equivalent in return. Anthropology gets into delicate legitimation difficulties due to its inclination to analyze the collective subjects of those rights as emergent results of the rights.

(6.) Just as the country itself, German-language anthropology was reduced to ashes in 1945. In the following 60 years much energy was used for the adoption of American, English, French and other schools of anthropologies. It seems meaningful, in the context of a GAA conference, to ask what has become of this *process of adoption*.

(7.) What is the influence on young German anthropologists of current changes in research funding and university competitions, attempts at establishing standardized criteria of evaluation and the increasing pressure to publish in American journals?

These are only some of the approximate tendencies challenging a new positioning of anthropology in the beginning of the 21st century. It may well be that these are singular, unconnected tendencies. But it may also be that these tendencies converge around one great change that was initiated since the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, and, in an accelerated way, after the fall of the Twin Towers on November 9, 2001. Until now it is hardly possible to understand this big transformation. But we may assume that anthropology will certainly not be unaffected.

One may even suspect that anthropology will only now make the move it was not able to make during the whole 20th century. It was not possible to succeed because all important listeners were convinced that the diversity of cultures that would last through history, exclusively meant those areas that do not really count in the end, and because of this can be written off under the notions of tolerance and multiculturalism. No one seriously doubted that the western citadels of science and

technology, economy, law and democracy belong to a culture-free sphere of rationalism and nature which will by and by spread in the whole world and to the benefit of the world. Now, after this conviction has gone down and has given way to two contrary and deep-seated fears – the fear of globalization as a standardization machine and the fear of a unbridgeable fragmentation of the world – anthropology has got its late historical chance. It may now, under the new conditions, start from the beginning with the attempt to prove that there are other worlds.

At the GAA Conference in October 2007 aspects of these tendencies will be discussed in two plenary sessions of the common format as in one plenary event of the format „Contributions from Halle“. The study groups and regional groups are invited to organize their workshops according to the leading questions and for once to concentrate on guest speakers from the German-speaking area.