The Value of an Anthropological Approach to International Intervention, Part II: The Suffering Slot and the (Lost?) Critical Potential of Difference

Two other pieces have gotten me thinking about how we understand/represent the value of the anthropological study of international intervention. The first is Chapter 6 of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s 2003 Global Transformations. Anthropology and the Modern World, entitled “Making Sense: The Fields in which We Work.” Among other things, it includes his argument about the value and relevance of anthropology in the 21st century, and how it ought to be practiced after the critiques of the 1990s (including his own critiques of the culture concept and “savage slot” anthropology).

The aspects of his argument that I want to focus on here begin with what he identifies as anthropology’s “moral optimism about humanity”: that “humanity is essentially good, its history notwithstanding.” He argues that this moral optimism is anthropology’s “greatest appeal and yet its most guarded secret,” our “best bet in times of fragmented globality that are marked by the death of utopia and where futures are so uncertain” (136). But we cannot bury this optimism “under weak social analysis flavored by political optimism...when we do that we add insult to injury for we aestheticise the natives’ pain to alleviate our own personal uneasiness” (Ibid.). So what should we do? Firstly, “abandon the fiction that anthropology is not a discourse to the West, for the West, and about the West as project.” He continues, “the primarily goal of the discipline is a counter-punctual argument to some primary Western narrative” (137). For Trouillot, we are likely to find our work more relevant and more effective when we clearly identify our “hidden interlocutors in the West who are the ultimate targets of our discourse” and when we explicitly “publicize the stakes of this exchange about humankind within the West” (136) – when anthropology “rids itself of some of its shyness and spells out its stakes for a wider audience” (137). He concludes “We owe it to ourselves and to our interlocutors to say loudly that we have seen alternative visions of humankind—more than any other discipline—and that we know that this one may not be the most respectful of the planet we share, not indeed the most accurate or the most practical. We also owe it to ourselves to say that it is not the most beautiful nor optimistic” (139).

The second piece is an article by Joel Robbins entitled “Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good” (JRAI Volume 19, Issue 3, pages 447–462, September 2013). In it he makes at least two arguments that are relevant here. The first covers similar terrain as Keane and Trouillot: namely, that cultural anthropology (in North America) moved away from the study of the other qua other as its primary object of anthropological attention. This move was in response to transformations “in the broader symbolic organization that define the West and the savage, transformations by which narratives of development and progress that had driven Western history were beginning to lose their power to organize our understanding of the
world”—of which the critiques of the 1980s, encapsulated by Trouillot’s critique of Savage Slot Anthropology, were symptomatic. This was because, as Robbins argues, “the other...no longer answered our own culture’s most pressing concerns.” But what was to replace the study of the other as anthropology’s raison d’être? Robbins argues that, to a significant degree, the “suffering subject,” “the figure of humanity united in its shared vulnerability to suffering...has replaced the savage one as the privileged object of our attention” (8).

He sees key signs of this transformation in their work of others, such as the literary critic Cathy Caruth, who suggested in her edited volume on trauma, “in a catastrophic age...trauma itself might provide the link between cultures.” Robbins believes this is how anthropology in the early 1990s changed in relation to those it studied – from one of analytic distance and critical comparison focused on difference to one of empathic connection and moral witnessing based on human unity” (14-15). Note how this echoes Keane’s observation about a common strategy for responding to the problems of representations that “restag(e) anthropology’s claims to an epistemology of intimacy – to claim some identity with the people being represented” (Keane, 78). Robbins notes that it is the very commonness of trauma, its universal quality, that has made it so prominent as a lens through which to view the world – “for anthropologists, it takes care of some of the problems identified with the anthropology of the other, such as difference: we as observers and witnesses are secure in our ability to know it when we see it and to feel empathy with those who suffer it in “a sort of communion of trauma” (Robbins 16).

He continues “Recall that the West lost interest in the savage because it lost a role for difference and the radically other in its intellectual life and its self-understanding. Anthropological critics of othering felt the force of this loss early and pressed the point home. But it was only when trauma became universal, when it came to define humanity without borders, that anthropologists found a foundation for their science that allowed them to dispense with the notion of the other completely. Because of its universalistic quality, the suffering subject appeared to anthropologists not just as something new to study, but as a solution to a problem that had in the 1980s appeared ready to condemn their discipline to irrelevance” (16-17).

This is the first major argument Robbins makes that is relevant for the discussion here. And while Robbins does not critique the rise of “suffering slot anthropology” per se—he argues that “this kind of anthropology surely has important work to do in addressing the great cultural problems of our age” (21)—he does argue that something gets lost. And this is the other argument I am interested in, namely, that anthropology has “lost hold of the critical potential of the notion of difference.”

To make this argument, he takes two ethnographies that he says are exemplary of suffering slot anthropology – Val Daniels’ article “Crushed Glass, or Is There a Counterpoint to Culture,” and
Joao Biehl’s *Vita*. Among other things, both pieces implicitly argue that traumatic suffering is beyond culture. On Daniels, he writes “This is a way of writing ethnography in which we do not primarily provide cultural context so as to offer lessons in how lives are lived differently elsewhere, but in which we offer accounts of trauma that make us and our readers feel in our bones the vulnerability we as human beings all share” (19). On Biehl’s *Vita*, he writes “Like Daniels’ recounted narratives, Biehl’s telling of Catarina’s story addresses its readers in their humanity – their ability to recognize suffering in its universal form.” He also notes, however, that the story is not in any significant respect Brazilian (i.e. culturally or historically contextualized).

To outline what is lost here, he returns to Trouillot, who noted that “the savage slot was not invented on its own, but came into being only after the rise of the idea of utopia in the early 1500s…the idea of the savage has always been closely tied to the question of what might constitute a perfect society. At its best, anthropology in the savage slot era held to this understanding, basing itself on the promise that the discovery of other ways of living might teach us the limits of our own, and might lead us to a vision of a world that was better than ours in ways we could not on our own imagine” (Robbins 21). He concludes his article by noting some new trends in anthropology that might respond to this loss and complement the anthropology of suffering, and that might be brought together to construct an anthropology of the good (which is Robbins real project).

Here he mentions anthropological work on value, morality, and well-being (how people imagine “the good” and act to create it); on empathy, care, and the gift (how people work to create the good in social relationships); and time, hope, and change (they ways people come to believe that they can successfully create a good beyond what is presently given in their lives, i.e. how people “construct the good”) (24-25). He notes that there is a strong temptation to dismiss people’s investments in realizing the good in time as mere utopianism, to smother their hopes analytically with what Clifford…has recently called our own “wet-blanket realism”. However, “if part of the point of the anthropology of the good is to return to our discipline its ability to challenge our own versions of the real, then we have to learn to give these aspirational and idealizing aspects of the lives of others a place in our accounts” (26).

Now, there is much one can disagree with here. We may not agree with Trouillot about who the primary interlocutors and ultimate target audience of anthropology are. We may not agree with Robbins’ reading of shifts in anthropology, or of Daniels or Biehl or Trouillot. I find both persuasive enough to think with. For example, following Robbins argument, how much of the anthropological writing on humanitarianism and humanitarian intervention focuses on the suffering subject? (A lot.) And does a focus on the suffering subject keep intact the (critical) anthropological ethic Keane identified, i.e. a concern with human freedom and
agency? (Absolutely.) Must a concern with human suffering or human freedom discard cultural context? Given that anthropological studies in/on contexts of various international interventions (whether military, political, humanitarian, etc.) are bound up to some degree with the terms and aims of those interventions, is there room for an anthropology that takes up the critical and/or utopic potential of difference (various described by Trouillot and Robbins)? Or would that constitute misplaced urgency given the kinds of things we see unfold in contexts of intervention?

Returning to Trouillot: I think in some ways anthropologists working in/on contexts of international intervention are already fairly clear that our primary interlocutors and the ultimate targets of our discourse are “in the West”; and I think that, implicitly, much anthropology in these contexts is, somewhat, arguing against a “primary Western narrative” (often about the desirability/effects of promoting as universal a particular model of organizing politics, economics, and society). But are we spelling out the stakes? Are the stakes, ala the discussion of Keane in the first blog post, primarily about human freedom, or ala Robbins, about suffering? Are these the only stakes?