



DEBATE

## Anthropology is an odd subject

Studying from the outside  
and from the inside

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This essay considers the contribution that social and cultural anthropology can make to other disciplines. This contribution is of two sorts. First, anthropology offers a glimpse of what society may have been like for most of human history when the state and its invading presence are absent. Such knowledge cannot be obtained directly but studying communities where the state is remote does give a flavor of what such life is like. Second, anthropology has developed a method of studying others through participation. This method is apparently deceptively straightforward but, nonetheless, it has profound theoretical implications. It is based on the recognition that we can only know those people who at first seem different by sharing what is *implicitly* involved as they go about their normal life.

Keywords: ethnography, knowledge, participation, points of view

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Although in this essay I want to sing the praises of anthropology, I have to recognize that, as the discipline has presented itself to students of the past and the present, it is an odd subject. A central oddity is that it involves two very different disciplinary activities—so different that they could be said to be contradictory.

One of these activities, usually called ethnography, involves getting to learn how the world is acted upon and appears from the point of view of those one is

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This text was originally part of the yearly foundation lecture given at Fitzwilliam College Cambridge in 2015. The lecture was addressed to the members of the College and was therefore aimed toward a general academic public, most of whom knew very little or nothing about anthropology. The lecture was intended to show scholars from other disciplines what anthropology could contribute.



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studying. These are often people who are geographically and culturally remote from the places the anthropologist has been familiar with. Ethnography involves making sense of the way people lead their lives in terms of the way they themselves see the world, things, and other people. This can be said to need understanding “from the inside,” and for this essay I shall retain this phrase. Of course, there is also another aspect to this task that involves conveying this “from the inside” understanding to others: readers, colleagues, students who may be interested, but here I shall leave this aside.

The other kind of thing that anthropologists try to do, or at least tried to do, is contribute to a general theory about what human beings are like, while still bearing in mind the variety of places and times in which the species finds, and has found, itself. Since humans live in different places and times and therefore see the world, things, and people differently, the attempt to generalize about our species cannot be based on the local point of view of any particular group at any particular place and time. Therefore, to do theory anthropologists seem to need to take a “from the outside” stance to do this. And so, this is a very different job to the “from the inside” stance. The “from the outside” stance involves ultimately seeing things in terms of the general life of our species as it exists and has existed on our planet. The “from the inside” stance involves sharing as much as possible the point of view of those we write about in the way that we try to do in any intimate relation.

There is therefore a contradiction in what anthropologists have been up to. How can one be looking from the inside out and at the same time be looking from the outside in? It’s not surprising that so many anthropologists have thrown up their hands in despair and decided to concentrate on one or other of these two tasks. That is *a* solution and it produces good work but many of us believe there is also something to be gained from retaining the original unstable equilibrium.

The fact that many anthropologists, myself included, attempt to combine both the “from the inside” and the “from the outside” stance owes much to the accidents of the history of the discipline but in this essay I am going to try to convince you—and perhaps myself—that, however this duality has come about, the contradiction is actually fruitful if continually difficult. Furthermore, I shall also propose that this apparent incoherence, which anthropologists have to face, is one that exists, or perhaps should exist, in all social sciences and indeed in other nonsocial sciences that also deal with human beings. So the fact that anthropologists have to think about the inside/outside problem so centrally may well mean that this enforced consideration can become a contribution that we can make to other cognate disciplines.

But first let me get on with a more straightforward task. This is to convince you that the good old-fashioned anthropology such as has been taught here in Cambridge and other places has, in any case, made significant contributions to the wider study of human beings. Even if some of my colleagues seem unwilling to blow their disciplinary trumpet, I am not ashamed to so.

## From the outside

Let me start with what the “from the outside” stance that this sort of anthropology has contributed.



When anthropology started as an academic subject in the late nineteenth century, in the wake of the excitement that Darwinism had caused, the mission of the kind of study that became social cultural anthropology was clear. It was to furnish information about surviving primitive or savage peoples in order to enrich our understanding of the early history of mankind. The job was, more particularly, to furnish information about the immaterial aspects of our early ancestors, aspects that archaeologists obviously could not be expected to dig up. During most of the twentieth century, anthropologists actually carried on in this general direction, even if they gradually lost faith in the original program, but they continued to study the kind of people who the early anthropologists and probably the general public still, consider “primitives.” As time went on, however, the anthropologists themselves grew more and more uncomfortable with this job description. They pointed out that people such as the hunters and gatherers of Africa, to take an often used example, could not be equated with stone-age Europeans since they were living in quite different circumstances to the hunters and gatherers of the European Paleolithic, and that if only because these people were by then surrounded by others who used more complex technology. Furthermore, it is obvious that the history of living hunters and gatherers, starting from the emergence of *Homo sapiens* to the present, had been just as long for developments to happen as for the inhabitants of Silicon Valley.

The reason for the unease with the old dispensation was not just this, however. It was the fully justified realization that calling people “primitive” or “savage” was, in ordinary English, a dehumanizing and arrogant devaluation of others. In fact, the use of the term primitive was often little more than a justification for colonization, and the offensive terms were nothing else than a glorification of brute force. Such totally justified discomfort led not only to an abandonment of such terms in anthropology; it also led to the gradual abandonment of the study of those who had interested the early anthropologists. So many of my colleagues are now much more comfortable studying the aforementioned inhabitants of Silicon Valley or Anglican parishioners living in suburbia than bushmen or rural Malagasy.

I have nothing against this kind of new work as such—though perhaps we may think we have enough other disciplines already discussing Silicon Valley—but this move often makes us forget the key contribution to the vast field of the study of human beings that continuing in the traditional fields has made and is making.

We should perhaps consider our task more in terms of what anthropologists can contribute to a vast enterprise in which so many disciplines are engaged than focus on what should legitimately be the isolated program of the subject of anthropology as though it existed in an academic vacuum.

By now most school children are taught that *Homo sapiens* has been around for two hundred thousand years or so, that significant domestication of plants and animals has occurred not much more than 10,000 years ago, that large scale states have been around for only 6,000 years. This means that the period on which the early anthropologists thought they were able to furnish information about is, at the very least, 95 percent of the history of humankind.

The flaws in the original program of the discipline are very real, but the contribution to the “from the outside” knowledge of the history of our species that the study of societies that would have been considered as primitive by the

early anthropologists remains very important. Here are a few examples of these contributions.

Take the case of the isolated village in Madagascar, deep in the forest, that I have been studying recently. I think such a place can, at least, teach us something about the extraordinary transformations that the growth of the state brings about in human history. True, the inhabitants of this village cannot be thought of as representative of what life was like before there were states. Indeed, a most significant part of their history concerns their moving to this remote location precisely in order to escape various types of states, including the modern Malagasy state. In that way, the place is more poststate than prestate. On the other hand, studying it can inform our exploration of what it is like to live without the overwhelming presence of the state. It can help us to do this in a more informed way than someone like—to take an example at random—Hobbes did without having any such knowledge. A study of this village and others like it *does* contribute, in an inevitably tentative way, to the theoretical exploration of what political life is in such circumstances. One *can* thus use the knowledge of a place like this village to think in a somewhat more informed way about the state itself and what kind of phenomenon it represents. Several anthropologists have done this. For example, knowledge of the place in Madagascar has given me support for arguments that propose that states bring about even more fundamental modifications to the social than what is usually suggested.

Then there is another way by which fieldwork in the traditional locations can be a contribution to the “from the outside” stance. One thing that even the most hostile critic of studying the kind of societies that the early anthropologists called primitive would grant us is that, at least, it has enabled us to get an idea of just how varied, or not varied, the ways of thinking and the social organizations that human beings have created are. Something that might not emerge so clearly from a study of the folks of Silicon Valley who, looked at from the perspective of, let us say, New Guinea highlanders, seem rather similar to any old Westerner. The fundamental variation that exotic societies reveal is much more fundamental than some believe and also much less fundamental than others seem to believe, but we need the information. For example, the significance of ritual exchange in exotic societies has made us examine what we would have thought straightforward: what social relations consist of and what material goods can mean. As anthropologists, because of our familiarity with very exotic places, we are continually aware how apparently common sense ideas of what “people are like,” in subjects such as economics or evolutionary psychology, unconsciously make use of concepts that are historically specific to modern Western society and therefore, in spite of seeming to be “from the outside” are in fact from our “from the inside”—the wrong inside. Also it should make us realize how fanciful are some proposals of radical otherness entertained by some philosophers simply musing in their studies.

We certainly don't want to go back to early evolutionary ideas that are still held unreflexively by many people. It has been a useful contribution of the discipline to criticize these severely. But, by studying the societies that interested the classical anthropologists, we can nevertheless make an important positive contribution to the joint “from the outside” enterprise of studying our species, its character, and its evolution.

## From the inside

Then there is another—completely different—way in which the practice of the discipline has made a contribution to the general enterprise. This concerns our “from the inside” approach whose aim is to convey the point of view of those we study. Not many disciplines consciously attempt to do this and even those that do, such as history, do this differently. Our way of doing this, was, and is, forced on us when we work among ordinary peoples in tribal or peasant societies. These are places where there often are no written documents or people who are used to pontificating about the why and wherefores of their lives. Most of the time these people are simply busy living them. This means that the anthropologist has no other choice in order to get and convey the point of view of those she studies, than participating in their lives rather than listening to explicit statements. It is through this participation—often very long-term participation—that anthropologists intuit what life in those places is like “from the inside.”

This method is usually called participant observation. There are various explanations why anthropologists have come to favor it. Irrespective of whether these accounts of the origin of this way of going about things are convincing or not (there was a large element of happenstance), I have become ever more confident of the unique value of doing things in this way. It is the kind of research method that the discipline of British social anthropology encouraged me to do when I set out for Madagascar and that I have continued to use in several places in that country.



Figure 1: Preparing maize in Madagascar.

To give you an idea of what is involved, I have chosen one of the few pictures I have of myself doing participant observation; it’s from some time ago, as you can see. Here I am with a group of people in whose house I had been living for several months, preparing maize so that it could be hung from the rafters, out of reach from rats, to be covered by soot, that will then act as a very effective insect repellent. Being with people one knows and chatting with them as one gets on with doing whatever is being done seems the very opposite of the basic principles of objectivity scientists are taught since, clearly, my presence is interfering with what is going on and there is no isolation from other factors of the phenomena under



study where and when it is taking place. Yet, in spite of these objections, participant observation is an original and powerful research method that developed in social anthropology over the twentieth century. I would go so far as to argue that it is the only method by which we can get a “from the inside” point of view. This is because the knowledge all of us live by is largely implicit.

This method is usually attributed to one of the founders of social anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski. He advocated this way of research for studying the social organization of people in the Trobriand Islands. It is not clear how much Malinowski himself actually did the kind of participant observation he advocated, but my fellow students and myself in Cambridge certainly did. It was what we understood we should do. At first what participant observation involves seems deceptively straightforward. What it meant, in my case at least, was that I managed to convince the people you see in the photo to let me stay with them for many months in order to do what was certainly not all that clear to me. Basically, I was trying to understand what was going on and to participate in the activities people were engaged in as much as they were willing to let me and as much as I was able . . . while, of course, still writing notes and making myself as comfortable as I could.

My relationship to my hosts was partly one of superiority. It was one of superiority in that they thought of me as white and therefore associated me with people who had been colonial rulers and that, they ruefully said and with a touch of irony, were incredibly more advanced in technology and similar things than they were. Also they assumed that, in money terms, I was much richer than them, and they also assumed, by and large wrongly, that I had some association with the most powerful institution that affected them: the Catholic Church.

Yet there was another side to our relationship that was painfully obvious to me and indeed to them. This was a clear relationship of dependence and even inferiority. I was dependent on my hosts on a day-to-day basis. I was begging them to let me stay and to take part in whatever they were up to. They knew perfectly well that they could stop me doing this and they sometimes did, as I had no relevant backing from state or semistate institutions, the place was too remote. Furthermore, there was a very obvious sense, to me, but I believe to them also, in which I was a *learner* and they were my *teacher*. Perhaps this was most obvious in terms of language. I was learning from them something they were far more competent in than I and they often took great pleasure in correcting my grammar and enlarging my vocabulary. This paralleled my inferiority in many other skills. As fieldwork went on, my superiority faded, and it did so rapidly with the people I was intimate with; on the other hand, my dependence did not, so my participant observation got better. Participant observation could thus best be described as a form of long-term negotiation from a position of weakness.

As I did and still do participant observation, I was and still am doing much the same thing as you see me doing in this picture—the last time was two years ago. Probably because of time, our involvement with each other gets deeper. It is less clearly a relationship of inferiority because of my age, but also it is less a relationship of superiority. I am trying to understand how life is for them by being involved with them.

This is the way that many anthropologists have, and still do, obtain a “from the inside” point of view. It is a method full of problems, some of which I have



mentioned already, but it still seems to me that the humility inevitably involved is the best way I know of what may seem an impossible task, getting to know others “from the inside” point of view.

Participant observation involves using the amazing research tool that evolution has given us all, *free*, without a grant from research councils or foundations, which is our evolved mind. This kind of brain is what we use to get our knowledge of their “from the inside.” Communication in normal life is not a matter of exchanging information in the way we exchange train tickets for money, but it is a matter of mind reading. Let me give you an example. If the woman in the picture says to me, “why don’t you take a rest now,” I will probably ignore the literal meaning of her words but I will understand that I am not doing the task properly and so I will look more carefully how she is doing it and try to perfect my technique. There’s nothing very complicated in this but I understand her *because* I am easily reading her mind, which I can do because I know her well and I know the context of her life. I can correct what I am doing because I know what the purpose of the task is and also because I know something about the Malagasy rules of politeness through long-term practice. Thus we communicate through what Malinowski called “context of situation” and through mind reading. Mind reading can be glossed as the fact that, to a certain extent, I am being her as a result of many, many exchanges, and as a result of shared life. I can know her point of view “from the inside” in myself. If this is successful, and it’s relatively easy because of our human mind, I have obtained through participant observation knowledge of her “from the inside” point of view.

Communication, or such research if you like, turns out to be above all a long-term and complex social relation. This brings me back to the discussion of hierarchy and dependence in the field situation. The exchange of mind reading through which the “from the inside” view is obtained need not be between equals but it must be between individuals who recognize themselves and others as people involved in each other, because to do that is what our brain has evolved to do.

I have introduced this short discussion of communication because this is simply (or if you like, difficultly) what participant observation uses. Participant observation, as a scientific method, is full of problems but this research tool, which social anthropology has made central, is the only full way that we can get an insider’s point of view and this is what other human sciences so often lack. I shall return to this point.

From the inside to the outside; from the outside to the inside.

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I have argued that anthropology has contributed a number of good things to the various sciences, social or otherwise, that study human beings. These contributions are a few bricks that we have added to the huge project of studying our species. But the question remains whether the bricks that we have brought “from the inside” view and “from the outside” are far apart in the wall of relevant knowledge or whether they together form a more coherent contribution. This is what I want to look at in the last part of this essay. At first they don’t seem to cohere, but I want to argue that this apparent disassociation is less than we might have at first thought.

Let’s look again at both the “from the inside” and “from the outside” stances and see whether they really are as separate as they seem.

I start with the “from the inside” stance.

The aim of the “from the inside” view is to capture the world the people live in from their perspective. However, for reasons that I have already mentioned, what this perspective consists of is far from straightforward. The temptation, a temptation that the early anthropologists fell prey to, is to see this view as made up of a series of propositions or beliefs. This would also be insufficient to give an account of our own life but it is all the more obviously inadequate as an account of the point of view of people who normally have neither the time, nor the opportunity, nor perhaps the desire, to pontificate about their beliefs. So anthropologists lacking a simple guide to what the people they study live by, cannot help but reflect deeply about what kind of thing this “view from the inside” that they are trying to capture actually is. In other words, they are drawn by their puzzlement to put their finger on the nature of the inside view, to engage in a “from the outside” perspective of analyzing the nature of what knowledge from the inside is, at the very same time that they are trying to capture it. This reflection may be unexamined explicitly, which is epistemologically dangerous, and so anthropologists are often drawn into making explicit their understanding of what the inexplicit consists of. You may have noticed how, in my case, I was drawn in this direction when discussing ethnography.

This drift from the inside to the outside is not just a quirk of mine. No better example of this drift exists than in the work of Malinowski. Actually, my discussion about communication in general was very similar to what Malinowski proposed and what Wittgenstein said about sense because they too realized that a discussion of a “from the inside” point of view requires a discussion of the character of the inside from the outside. Thus Malinowski, the great advocate of the “from the inside” point of view, inevitably slid toward a “from the outside” view. This was the case for Malinowski and it led to a profound discussion about human communication and knowledge. This direction *toward* the outside from the inside is one that continued in his work in ways that may have surprised him but that has never stopped becoming richer. It is one with which we are by now familiar through developments in linguistics and now in cognitive science. Thus, the approach of cognitive science consciously links the understanding “from the inside” with an analysis of the fundamentals of the process that makes such an understanding possible. It therefore moves disciplines like anthropology and philosophy toward subjects like neurology and evolutionary biology, subjects that we might have thought of as typical of the “from the outside stance.” This is the direction that Malinowski took in his writing. I would love to say more about this but, for the moment, I just want to emphasize that the apparent contradiction between the “from the outside” and “from the outside” often dissolves in the work of an anthropologist such as Malinowski, perhaps because of the disciplinary tradition that has made anthropologists take both stances.

And what about the “from the outside” stance?

The “from the outside” stance seems cold and objective. It would seem to look at human beings rather like a geologist would look at a rock formation, with an unbridgeable distance between the scientist and what she is talking about, a mile away from the ethnographic effort at interpretation from the inside. But is that cold distance possible or even scientifically right for sciences that study human beings?

There is a premise to science in general that the scientist and what she studies are quite different, that they are in different worlds. Thus, contamination is a





problem that should be avoided—for example, in medical research. Whatever can be said about this, when considering science in general there is something rather hypocritical about such an attitude when we are dealing with social science.

Certainly we can know about humans entirely “from the outside,” in the way we can know about fish. We can observe their movements, their distribution in space, their speed, and so on. This is all “from the outside” in that we do not seem to try to explain the actions of fish by seeing it as the product of their point of view or their desires. If we were to go down that path, we probably would be rapped on the knuckles for engaging in anthropocentrism. It seems just about possible to similarly study human beings entirely “from the outside,” in the way we study fish, but however well done such a study, this stance will always seem incomplete. Whether we want it or not, we very soon find ourselves simultaneously explaining what we study in terms of actors motivation (“from the inside,” in other words).

Consider the example of the theory about the state that I touched on earlier. I argued that the gradual establishment of states so disrupts and destroys the nonstate social that it creates a permanent situation of incompleteness, both at the individual and the social level. One can consider this to be a “from the outside” generalization about human social evolution, rather like an evolutionary zoologists’ explanation of the length of giraffe’s necks. However, the parallel is misleading. My explanation must also involve the feeling of what the world is like from the point of those caught up in the process “from the inside.” This “from the inside” view is what will explain what people will do, or in other words, *what happens*.

Where do I get the input to imagine this “from the inside” stance? Partly from what I believe I share as a human being with the people I am thinking about, but also by living in the kind of communities such as the Malagasy village to which I have referred. This is a general human “from the inside” point of view broadened by my experience of radically different types of local “from the inside” points of view.

This inevitability of a “from the inside” element, in what at first appears as “from the outside,” appears in all sciences that deal with our species. Take the example of demography. I suppose demographers could limit themselves to looking simply at numbers and some—a few—do. However, very soon the demographer is drawn to look for explanations of what she has counted. These explanations must involve the motivation, in the context of situation, in which the people concerned find themselves. For example, a rise in the birth rate is explained by the feeling of confidence in the future among those concerned. This process of necessarily imagining “from the inside” is even clearer in subjects such as history, economics, or sociology. But on what basis is this imagination created? And is there not a danger in assuming simply from introspection that very different people to ourselves will act as we would? Economists realizing the danger have turned to psychologists, but psychologists study motivation in general, outside any real context of situation. However useful this might be, it never comes near to the necessity of explaining the behavior of the very different specific people who inhabit the world in specific situations and who are the product of specific histories. That can only be got from the kind of information that ethnography provides.

Thus, these other disciplines have also to face the apparent uncomfortable contradiction of the combination of the “from the inside” and “from the outside”

situation that anthropologists for so long have had to worry about and face. Pretending that it is not there is dangerous because it *is* there. In maintaining the balance, anthropologists have recently tried to pull too much toward “from the inside perspective.” That’s our problem. On the other hand, seen from anthropology, the problem of many of our codisciplines in the human sciences is that they have not made room for the “from the inside” side of things. Perhaps I am asking too much of philosophers or economists or demographers to expect them to do Malinowski-type fieldwork . . . but secretly I think it would be a good idea. However, the difficulty for them to do so is more complex than it seems at first.

Let me illustrate this difficulty by giving you a very simple example from a discipline that at first sight seems closely related to anthropology and whose practitioners are often aware of the problem I am talking about: development studies. However, even there a true balance between the outside and the inside is so often missing.

In the area that I was studying when doing my doctoral research, the peasants there planted their rice by broadcasting. It is a type of cultivation that yields much less than the transplanting that was done in other parts of Madagascar. The developers using this knowledge and a “from the outside” view prescribed a program of action. Basing themselves on this stance, various development agencies—American, Korean, European—were busily teaching people to transplant and I often observed this ridiculous sight, ridiculous because all their “pupils” had relatives in areas where people did transplant and most had transplanted when they had gone to visit them. They had chosen not to transplant in the areas where they were living now for reasons that were partly good economic ones and partly because of the organization of their family system.

You may think that the developers talking with the people concerned would have easily remedied the misunderstanding. This is to underestimate the complexity of communication. It was impossible to make the problem clear to either party but when I tried to help, this was not much real help either. We just could not make both sides understand each other. The difficulty was twofold. It is the difficulty that had created among anthropologists the realization of the need for the kind of participant observation that anthropologists practice. The first aspect of this difficulty was that to explain the situation to the developers required giving them a much richer context to a different types of life than can be conveyed in a few sentences. The developers would have had to share with the people concerned much more significantly than they could understand was necessary. The second aspect of the difficulty was that the villagers, for the reasons I mentioned and like all of us, simply cannot *hear* people with whom they do not have a genuine social relation or if they have some kind of relation it is one of unmitigated total inequality. This is my point.

I just said that perhaps one cannot expect economists, psychologists, or demographers to do fieldwork the way anthropologists do, though perhaps they should. But developers, at least, could be expected to do so. They could be expected to sit with the people concerned as in the picture I showed you, to establish a real two-way social relation, to learn with the degree of humility that learning requires. And then, perhaps, that stance might spread to other disciplines studying our species. This, at least, would be one of the several real contributions that anthropology can make to the general enterprise of studying our own species.



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## L'anthropologie est une matière étrange: sur le fait d'étudier à la fois de l'extérieur et de l'intérieur

Résumé : Cet essai considère la contribution possible de l'anthropologie culturelle et sociale à d'autres disciplines. Cette contribution serait double: d'une part, l'anthropologie laisse entrevoir ce que pouvait être une société durant l'essentiel de l'histoire humaine, quand la présence invasive de l'état n'était pas établie. Il est impossible d'accéder directement à ce savoir, mais étudier des communautés éloignées de l'état donne une idée de ce que cette vie a pu être. Deuxièmement, l'anthropologie a développé une méthode d'étudier les autres de manière participative. Cette méthode peut sembler intuitive, mais ses implications théoriques sont en fait importantes. Elle se fonde sur une prise de conscience du fait qu'il n'est possible de connaître les sociétés qui nous semblent dans un premier temps très différentes qu'à condition de partager les fondations implicites de leur vie quotidienne.

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