



# Editorial

## The six-field system

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Anthropology because of its four sub-disciplines – social and cultural anthropology, archaeology, human biology and linguistics – seeks understanding of social and cultural phenomena in all places and all times. Arguably, because of this vast remit, it is the indispensable discipline investigating the human condition in the sense that you must refer to it if you wish to know about humanity. The goal of *Anthropological Theory* (hereafter *AT*) is to support and enhance anthropology's place as this discipline. However, the question is, how does a journal of *theory* accomplish such a goal?

It might be imagined that the way journals support intellectual traditions resembles the way farmers till fields. Farmers cultivate using different field systems. A simple, 'two-field' system is one where there are just two fields, say one for potatoes and another for corn. Just as a farmer works separate crop fields, so a journal cultivates related intellectual fields growing various varieties of knowledge. *AT* will adopt a six-field system which encompasses, cuts across and integrates the traditional four-field division of anthropology, in order to cultivate its goals.

Firstly, the journal is interested in *ontological* questions about the nature of being. In the recent past, such questions were often labeled 'metaphysical' and relegated to the proverbial dung heap of past mistakes. However, ontological questions do not go away, since there is always more to be said about the relationship between the mind, words and things. Anthropology is concerned with social and cultural being and is continually, implicitly and unconsciously posing ontological questions. When writers insist that culture is not material or that society consists of a base and a superstructure, then they are making ontological assertions. The question, of course, is whether the assertions are plausible and compelling, and how do you know. When answering such questions, one is cultivating a field of debate about ontology. *AT* will encourage such farming.

Secondly, the journal is interested in *epistemological* questions. If people want to know about social and cultural being in all places and times, then they need to reflexively examine the processes through which their knowledge is produced. Epistemology investigates how to know; that is, how to know how to know. Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, '“concept” is a vague concept'. Knowing how to reduce such vagueness is thinking epistemologically. One is cultivating in an epistemological field when one seeks to know what might constitute a social or cultural theory, how to arrive at the truth of such a theory in a world of contested truths, and how to make truths more generalizable through intersubjective communication.

Thirdly, and above all, as its title suggests, the journal is interested in *theoretical* questions. Theory, of course, is the most contested – Wittgenstein might say vaguest – of concepts since theories produce accounts of the social world which go beyond that which can be directly seen and measured. However, we can say that theories present us with both explanation and understanding where, to paraphrase Robert Nozick, explanation asserts actual connections between things whereas understanding locates the subject under consideration within a network and context of possibilities.

There are all sorts of theoretical questions: What is the origin of inequality, what is the meaning of meaning, how does culture change, what is the role of culture in gender differences? Of special interest are fiercely opposed theories. For example, there are now sociobiologists who insist that social practice results from Darwinian evolutionary processes, while others maintain that it is best understood as the result of historical and cultural processes. One is cultivating theoretical fields when one articulates and provides warrant for particular theories, and provides warrant for choosing between alternative theories. The emphasis here is upon *providing warrant*, that is, providing reasons for knowing why one theory is preferable to another.

Fourthly, the journal is interested in *historical* questions. Anthropological knowledge has its histories – converging and diverging genealogies – that wind back into different times and sociocultural places. A history of anthropological theory is needed in at least two senses. The debate between George Stocking and Marvin Harris in the 1960s concerned the relative merits of ‘presentist’ versus ‘historicist’ approaches to the history of anthropology. At the risk of over-simplification, the presentist position studies past history to help formulate more rigorous present theory. The historicist perspective examines theoretical genealogies by placing them in their social and cultural context. Harris championed a presentist, Stocking a historicist approach; and it seemed that each champion excluded the other. Their debate was significant, and given our present historical distance, it could well become the topic of an *AT* essay which moves beyond the either/or terms of the debate.

The history of anthropology, like the history of anything, should be studied in relationship to the political, economic, and cultural conditions out of which it emerged. Such investigations can provide clues to the present virtues of theory. For example, a history of the discipline between 1850 and 1950 would show that it had pretty much ignored gender, suggesting that the inclusion of this concept could enrich social and cultural speculation. One is cultivating historical fields in anthropology when it is shown how the states of different regions of the discipline came to be and what these states mean for the finer crafting of theory.

Fifthly, the journal is interested in the relationship between theory and *practical* questions. Everyday life for many includes poverty, hunger, war, preventable illness, racism, sexism and other forms of bias and, because of this, many experience horror and fear. The relationship between theories and social problems is not an easy and straightforward one. We must be aware that theory can be used to condone ideologically unacceptable social conditions. Nineteenth and twentieth century ‘scientific racism’ justified eugenic social engineering in Europe and racial segregation and apartheid in colonial Africa. One of the harder things to accomplish is to demonstrate how a theory which purports to do good, instead has deleterious consequences. Neo-liberal structural adjustment theory is used to re-arrange national economies in the name of the commonweal. However, some

say that this commonweal is that of only the rich and powerful. Is this true? One is cultivating in a field of practical theory when one applies a theory to solve some problem. One is intensively cultivating in such a field when one shows that a theory which purports to contribute to the development of all, advances the welfare of the privileged and, then, when one provides an alternative theory that can lead to a more egalitarian set of outcomes.

Sixthly, and lastly, the journal is interested in an *international* anthropology. Anthropology grew out of intellectual 'plants' cultivated first in Europe and later in North America; but, as already noted, it professes to talk about all people in all places and times. Now it happens that anthropologies have emerged in many places. There are well-established and distinguished Latin American, South Asian, Japanese, and African anthropologies. These voices need to be heard to give anthropology a better chance of achieving its goal of understanding all peoples in all places in all times. Cultivating an international anthropology requires the comparative discussion of particular anthropological traditions within the discipline as a whole.

*AT* will seek to make anthropology a truly indispensable discipline by, like a resourceful farmer, cultivating a six-field system. All are invited to work in these fields: some to sow, by crafting the different essays; some to harvest, by reading those essays. It is an interesting and challenging intellectual climate in which to launch anthropology's first journal to deal explicitly with theory. This inaugural issue of *AT* comes at a time when there has been a breakdown in the prestige of metanarratives in the social sciences generally, and when many anthropologists exhibit a skepticism towards grand theory and seek instead to confront social science models with the experiences and models of their subjects.

Yet the relationship between documenting experience and building theory must be more of a two-way process, where a pervasive and enervating incredulity is replaced with an openness to 'grounded theory', or social theory developed from close observation of society. This more inductive and comparative style of theory building, found particularly though not exclusively in anthropology, can avoid the arid and futile controversies found in formal or abstract theory, to which many anthropologists object. *AT* seeks to highlight anthropological forms of reasoning and imagination and present them more robustly to closely related fields of social research. This is a growing imperative since increasing numbers of sociologists, human geographers and writers in cultural studies now claim to be doing 'ethnography', and at the same time fewer theoretical insights from anthropology seem to gain influence beyond the borders of the discipline. While anthropology's claim to uniqueness on the basis of methodology becomes less sustainable, there has been no corresponding florescence in anthropological theorizing. This journal aims to address that uncomfortable reality by encouraging anthropologists to engage more directly and openly with all forms of social theory (from, *inter alia*, feminism to political philosophy to critical theory to post-colonial studies) and by creating a forum to present theoretical insights both to anthropologists and to others.