

# Anthropology and Custard the Dragon?

Laura Nader, University of California, Berkeley

---

I was invited to speak to the question *what is Anthropology?* It may be useful to start out by articulating what is unique about our discipline. For me it is its global quality (we are not limited geographically), its comparative potential (whether extensive or intensive), and its integrative or synthetic possibilities (historical, biological, linguistic, or socio-cultural). All of these criteria define what we read or teach about anthropology, but each teacher or student of anthropology is impacted by the style in which we present or receive materials. Is it narrow and specialized, or broad based and integrative or holistic?

As we know, our discipline is always changing, in one way or another responsive to the world around us or in reaction to the changing world stage. It has been called the uncomfortable discipline or, more graphically, “an institutionalized train wreck caught between the science and humanities.” We were one academic discipline that at the start refused to specialize, a discipline that has made enormous contributions to human knowledge and to what it means to be human, a discipline that has striven to overcome prejudice, a discipline that is only in its fourth generation.

In 1904, Franz Boas, who framed the discipline of holism, wrote “The History of Anthropology” for the International Congress of Arts and Sciences in St. Louis. In concluding, he lamented, “There are indications of [anthropology] breaking up.

The biological, linguistic, and ethnologic-archeological methods are so distinct” (1906:481). Yet in 2015, anthropology is still a discipline, still struggling with comparable fissures.

The two tendencies, fragmentation and holism, move us back and forth. With increasing specialization, we divide and subdivide and still call it anthropology. Do we really need a Christian anthropology, a Queer anthropology, a Quaker anthropology? The anthropological perspective, disrespectful as it is of boundaries and cherished truths, continues to permeate the social sciences and the humanities, other disciplines, and intelligent lay people. Although method is what defines specialties, it is the anthropological perspective that those outside our field relish—a perspective that sees what others often do not see, that makes connections that are not made elsewhere, that questions assumptions and exoticizes behavior that is normalized, that asks plain questions like, “What’s going on around here?”

Nineteenth-century archaeologists shook the bottom out of human history, replacing short chronologies of biblical origin with longer time depth. A bold physical and cultural anthropology questioned thinking of inequalities as innate. Observations on other cultures made us realize that our own culture is unusual in world context.

Twentieth-century anthropologists moved from the armchair to firsthand

fieldwork. Theories of cultural relativism challenged the predominant theories of their day developed by Marx, Freud, Malthus, and others. Anthropology became a science in that it rested on disciplined observation and experimentation, but what kind of science was not clear. The four fields are now more than four, and there are many more subfields.

Emerging ethnographies of science are having a powerful effect on contemporary anthropology, as did earlier studies of political economy and colonialism. Such ethnographies recognize natural science practices as intermixed with reflexivity, interpretation, and politics, and this has made a difference in how we think about knowledge. Comparisons of energy physicists in Japan and the United States, or comparisons of Japanese and American primatology, show that culture is at work in science practice. Furthermore, principles of a physical model may not be true for all times and all places. Anthropologists working in African agriculture observe the devastating effects of a cultural preference for universal explanations that override ecological particularisms and site-specific knowledge.

Throughout the twentieth century anthropologists observed the development of science and technology as measures of worth. By midcentury, we recognized the ideological nature of such beliefs. By end of century, what is at issue is whether Western ways of knowing provide us with the only source of truth. Think of recent discoveries in Peru of early climate prediction and the Pleaides. Rapid globalization makes consideration of the inter-mingling of knowledge systems inevitable.

Fieldwork, especially fine-grained, thick fieldwork, is good preparation for working with multisited publics, for when we speak to our publics it is the broad perspective that differentiates us from narrower specialists. Mel Konner put the problem well when he observed:

The problem is not that we know more about less and less. The problem is that we know more and more about more and more... The time will come when we know so much about so many things that no one person can hope to grasp all the essential facts... needed to make a single wise decision. Knowledge becomes collective in the weakest sense and science becomes like men and women in a crowd, looking for one another, each holding a single piece of a very expensive radio. [1982, xii]

During a decade of work on nuclear and alternative energies, a wide-angled anthropology was a requirement—one that drew on holism, appreciation of history and time depth, thinking of consequences arising from how language frames thought (Nader 1981). The discourse of energy specialists was often one of no option. They appeared to be caught in growth models. They were unilineal evolutionists with no time depth. They understood that civilizations rise but not that they collapse. Many scientists thought that technological progress equaled social progress. The idea that experts might be part of the problem was novel to them. The idea that the energy problem had human dimensions slowly sank in, as did the notion that the workplace in national laboratories affected their frame of

reference. Their science was framed by a cultural outlook that held some dangers of the sort of indifference that makes reckless experimentation with living beings possible. The capacity of humans to change the globe in irreversible ways was limited until recently. Physical scientists run the risk of tunnel vision, and we run the risk of believing them.

The energy work led me to think about extant civilizations and what others regard as progress. Useful in this endeavor was a literature mostly ignored by anthropologists but appreciated by multicultural classrooms, the ethnographic filtering of the West by literate people from other “civilizations”—Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Islamic, for example—travelers, diplomats, and missionaries who over the centuries came west and encountered Euro-American society for the first time. Al-Jabarti, an Arab chronicler, recorded firsthand the history of Napoleon’s French Expedition to Egypt in 1798 as well as the attitude of learned Egyptians toward the French occupation.

The idea that technological development need not be equated with civilization is alive today in spite of the strangeness of humanity united by industrialisms and an ideology of economic plenty. The disjunctures of modernity may not easily erase cherished continuities. Moreover, the problems that foreign observers see as present in the globalizing market economy were historically here where industrialization happened earlier. This was the subject of Anthony F. C. Wallace’s underappreciated book *Rockdale* (1978), which is summarized in his elaborate subtitle: *An Account of the Coming of the Machines. The Making of New Ways of Life in the Mill Hamlets, the*

*Triumph of the Evangelical Capitalists of Socialists and Infidels, and the Transformation of the Workers into Christian Soldiers in a Cotton-Manufacturing District in Pennsylvania in the Years before and during the Civil War.*

The concept of progress, as Kroeber noted in 1948, has a powerful hold on the unconscious as well as on the conscious thought of our day: it is an idea that forbids looking backward as we advance. Progress, Kroeber notes, is an a priori assumption that is adhered to with considerable fervor of emotion, something to be analyzed rather than taken for granted. To what extent is it continuous and inevitable? These are old questions still interesting to our publics, students among them, who ponder the directionality of our world and wonder if they should buy into the “inevitability syndrome,” the belief that the economy, like the universe, will continue to expand a long with climate change issues.

The “anthropological attitude” that values detachment and involvement as a mode of rethinking existing assumptions has not changed much in the past 100 years, nor have the social prejudices that it challenged: ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, the use of inadequate measures of human worth. What really has changed is the world around us as it affects who we are, what we study, and with what consequence, forcing us to probe why we take the stands we do.

The Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA, 1990) is reorienting the nature of Native American/archeologist dialogue. Its impact on museums and American archeology coincided with a more diverse composition

among American archeologists. The pasts created by the discipline now compete not only with biblical accounts but with others' versions of the past. The Hopi employ archeologists who document a Hopi past sometimes at odds with national American past and use them in negotiations with non-Hopi; they are diagnosing America, confronting dangerous truths and memory theory. At the same time, archeologists are opened to new self-realizations about perspectives that blind.

A frequently cited story of normative blindness is that of Cahokia. A rediscovery of Cahokia, at the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, tells of monumental cities visited by George Washington, recorded by Thomas Jefferson's associates, and then forgotten (Pauketat and Emerson 1997). The Manifest Destiny ideology that required the downgrading of the inhabitants who competed for land with white settlers resulted in normative blindness. In the center of Cahokia stands the third largest structure in preindustrial North America—Monk's Mound. Only the Great Pyramid of Cholula and Teotihuacan's Pyramid of the Sun are larger. It is an area of 83 hectares: a city of some twenty thousand people in a region of some fifty thousand people that some speculate was comparable in size to eleventh- or twelfth-century Venice—larger than London, Paris, and Cologne and smaller only than Constantinople and Seville. Notions of a vanishing race of savages implied that America's First Nations never reached a level of civilization comparable to that of the invading conquerors, but now a whole New World archaeology is being uncovered as a

property of indigenous peoples, from the Andes, to Mesoamerica, to Mound Builders of the eastern woodlands—a vertical world system, south-north.

With the auto-critique of the 1960s and 1970s, we adapted to what some call the incoherent conditions of accelerated history, the changed relationship between those who study and those being studied that forced anthropologists to consider the conditions under which their knowledge has been acquired. This new self-awareness had consequences. In 1973, Talal Asad was concerned with the political and administrative inequality between colonial anthropologists and colonized informants. By 1986, anthropologists were concerned with ethnographic texts. The exploration of the effects of colonial inequality of ethnographic perspectives became the investigation of the distorting effects of authoritative writing styles. One result was that questioning of political and military power was subsumed within literary representation. This self-critique or the so-called crisis of representation created anxiety in younger anthropologists and paralyzed some. There was a retreat from standard English.

Collingwood (1948) argues that history is the present view of the past. Linguistic anthropologists are turning diachronicity into an event. Language ideologies as in marketing the discourse of cholera are powerful in framing and reframing social reality (Briggs 1999). The dynamics of interlingual conversion is at the heart of mestizo and Indian identity. These are not crises that put in question anthropological existence; they are challenges to find ways to understand the relationship of language to

power with the help of social theory. We need a division of labor in anthropology.

Biological anthropology at the turn of nineteenth century was central to evolutionary biology and to social research addressing social Darwinism and eugenics. A century later, population biology and advances in brain science generated new questions and new eugenics. Earlier findings, such as the idea that physical types, language, and culture evolve independently, the rejection of race as the dominant paradigm for human variation, and primate adaptations as indicators in the evolution of humans, are being considered in a new context. If the biological category of race is without meaning, the social category of race is determining life chances.

These important issues delve into “traditional” anthropology questions in a new context. Culture is part of nature, and the changing nature of nature is a subject for all of us. A study of mythologies of menopause in Japan and North America (Lock 1993) asks, can menopause really be a disease? Biological anthropologists look for connections among early menarche, late childbearing, length of breastfeeding, long periods of menstruation and the incidence of breast cancer. Can menstruation be a disease? Can ADHD be a disease? Medical anthropologists are studying the buying and selling of human body parts as well as their theft, the significance of emerging concepts of “brain death,” and the more general problem of who owns the body (Scheper-Hughes 2000). Emerging economies use biopower for commercial and regulatory purposes, and though power need not be the theme for all anthropology, it is critical in examining central dogmas as they affect the

body and the body politic.

One of the hidden ideological premises necessary for the spread of the “free market” is the concept of nature as a resource or raw material. Indeed, conceptual categories are at the core of political struggles over biological diversity. The areas of high biodiversity are also those with high linguistic diversity. The loss of native languages means loss of knowledge and replacement by a new language as well as a new ecological frame, new resource economies, new discourses of “ecological modernization” that delegitimize conflict-based response in favor of coercive harmony. The Kayapo of Brazil think that knowledge is a product of nature, not of human nature, and not always translated into useful products, not requiring invention, thereby colliding with legal issues of nature/human.

Thus anthropologists of law concern themselves with Rule of Law as ideology (Mattei and Nader 2008); economic anthropologists, with financial institutions and kinship specialists; biological anthropologists, with gender and medical anthropology, linguistics, and environmental anthropology. New mixes are taking form—as are connections among anthropologists world-wide, movements, international bureaucracies, and individuals with competing ideas about the meaning of nature.

So why do the AAA meetings remind me of Ogden Nash’s story about “Custard the Dragon and the Wicked Knight?” The story is about Belinda, who lived in a little white house with a little gray mouse and a kitten and a puppy and a dragon called Custard.

One day Sir Gorgole, the Wicked Knight, came and stole Belinda, took her to his castle and put her in chains down in the basement. Although the dragon was called Custard because the mouse and the kitten and the puppy thought him cowardly, they all negated Custard's demand that they quickly move to save Belinda. So Custard the Dragon rose up, knocked down the castle door of Sir Gorgole and destroyed the Wicked Knight and freed Belinda!

So here at the AAA meetings, we hear one narrow contribution after another—the silo effect Gillian Tett (2015) calls it—until suddenly some anthropologist rises up to challenge the ignorance that results. And so we have in anthropology today David Graeber, who rises with *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (2011) and his recent *The Utopia of Rules* (2015); Nancy Scheper-Hughes studying the buying and selling of body parts that takes her from Israel to Moldova, to South Africa, and Brazilian jails in *Commodifying Bodies* (2002); Jonathan Marks, who writes *What It Means to be 98% Chimpanzee: Apes, People, and Their Genes* (2003) and now *Tales of the Ex-Apes* (2015) pushing boundaries; or Akbar Ahmed with *The Thistle and The Drone* (2013); or Jason de Leon using a holistic anthropology in *The Land of Open Graves* (2015); or Laura Nader in *What the Rest Think of the West* (2015); or Gillian Tett *Fool's Gold* (2010); or Margaret Lock on Alzheimer disease in the *Alzheimer Conundrum* (2013); and many others like the once undergraduate Amy Goodman, host of “Democracy Now.”

So where is anthropology in 2015? Still questioning assumptions, still crossing boundaries, still self-critical, still vibrant,

and still in need of dragons to wake us from self-satisfied states—good for communities, cities, states, war, and peace--the whole wide world!

### References Cited

- Ahmed, Akbar. 2013. *The Thistle and The Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Boas, Franz. 1906. “The History of Anthropology.” In *Congress of Arts and Science Universal Exposition*, Volume 5, edited by Howard J. Rogers, 468-482. St. Louis: Houghton Mifflin.
- Briggs, Charles L. 1999. “Sequentiality and Temporalization in the Narrative Construction of a South American Cholera Epidemic.” In *Theorizing the Americanist Tradition*, edited by Lisa Valentine and Regna Darnell, 330-337. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Collingwood, Robin G. 1948. *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- De Leon, Jason. 2015. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Graeber, David. 2011. *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. Brooklyn: Melvin House Publishing.
- Lock, Margaret. 1993. *Encounters with Aging: Mythologies of Menopause in Japan and North America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Konner, Mel. 1982. *The Tangled Wing-*

- Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.
- Marks, Jonathan. 2003. *What It Means to be 98% Chimpanzee: Apes, People, and Their Genes*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2015. *Tales of the Ex-Apes: How We Think About Human Evolution*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Mattei, Ugo and Laura Nader. 2008. *Plunder: When the Rule of Law is Illegal*. Maldwell: Blackwell Pub.
- Nader, Laura. 1981. "Barriers to Thinking New about Energy." *Physics Today* 34(3):9, 99-102.
- . 2015. *What the Rest Think of the West: Since 600 AD*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Wallace, Anthony F.C. 1978. *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution: an account of the coming of the machines, the making of a new way of life in the mill hamlets, the triumph of evangelical capitalists over socialists and infidels, and the transformation of the workers into Christian soldiers in a cotton-manufacturing district in Pennsylvania in the years before the Civil War*. New York: Knopf
- Pauketat, Tim R. and Thomas E. Emerson. 1997. *Cahokia: Domination and Ideology in the Mississippian World*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 2000. "The Global Traffic in Human Organs." *Current Anthropology* 41(1):99-103.
- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy and Louis Wacquant, eds. 2002. *Commodifying Bodies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Tett, Gillian. 2010. *Fool's Gold: The Inside Story of J.P. Morgan and How Wall Street Greed Corrupted Its Bold Dream and Created a Financial Catastrophe*. New York: Free Press.
- . 2015. *The Silo Effect: The Perile of Expertise and the Promise of Breaking Down Barriers*. New York: Simon & Schuster.