

## Editorial: Disturbance and creativity

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It is an old trick and one most of us get our students to do some time or other: Look up the word “culture” in a standard English dictionary. The usual first two entries are always good for a debate. There is the anthropological one, “as customs, values, etc., ‘especially at a particular time’”; and there’s the lit-crit one “as appreciation of art, literature, etc.” Which is right? How do they connect?—and so on. Then there’s the older meaning, “as improvement and development through care . . . cultivation.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the fiftieth issue of *Focaal* (and the first in which Oscar Salemink and I join Don Kalb as co-editors). The journal is only 25 years old of course, but it would be interesting to take the number of issues and push back fifty years to review the articles one would find then in a journal of anthropology. Almost certainly one would find that the majority of articles took as the standard the stability of customs and norms at a particular time; and only a few cultures would be seen to carry their own potential for “improvement and development.” Change was an issue of course—adaptation, instability, schism, and so on. But the way to get at these important and provocative processes was from the baseline of stability and continuity—even if these were to be understood in terms of an acknowledgment of history, rather than the stasis of “function.”

Seen from this fifty-year-old perspective, it is striking how entirely absent these kinds of starting-points are for any of the articles found in this issue. Although all of us are caught in the passages and corridors of this older architecture and we have all learned from our travels along

them (whether we care to admit it or not that we do not start from the same points of entry, this fact presents a huge challenge to the concepts we craft to convey the realities of the various situations we now confront.

The instability, transition, and disturbance that are the challenges faced in each of these articles, are precisely the springboards for imaginative leaps. And what we see is that these breaks and disturbances are experienced simultaneously as sources of threat and fear and as potentials and possibilities—both in the practices of daily life and in the conceptualizations of the anthropologists who study them. When the security of continuity is set against the risk of rupture and even chaos, we see what can be the grinding oppression of the former and the creative opportunities offered by the latter.

Thus in the Special Section, edited by Tatjana Thelen and Rosie Read, we find that by bringing together work on social security with feminist emphasis on “care” a whole series of relationships need to be re-thought, not least the role of the state in society and the fluid nature of state, nonstate provision. Then, when we read Goddard and de Kruijf, we are reminded what a shape-shifter the state can be under conditions of social, economic, and political transition. Goddard’s article helps us to share with the author the kind of open-ended exploration she needs to undertake when the state’s monopoly of violence has a sinister history and the state itself has become quite fuzzy, whereas on the other hand, resistance is also taking on complex and plastic forms. De Kruijf concerns himself with religious experiences in a country that has

been exposed to proselytizing practices from outside. The author discovers openings for creative possibilities, not just for the people being studied, but himself in the re-thinking of how we use existing notions such as charisma, and the distinction between home and abroad.

It has become clichéd to note how much all this differs from that old emphasis on cultural continuity, but the way in which the still older sense of the term is also thrown into question is perhaps more interesting. None of the authors here takes for granted the kind of progression implied in the notion of culture “as improvement and development through care . . . cultivation.” And yet it is the failed promise offered by past histories of collective culture that provide the provocations in these pieces: provocations to actors, to institutions, to assessments of personal and social value. And these in turn set the protagonists off into the dialogics of a wavering future, a future whose mastery is as vital as it is elusive. Culture then in this third sense, seen pessimistically, is in crisis and the endless attempts we see from one day to the next to make a fetish of it is a morbid sign of the disease; or, seen optimistically, we are witnessing an open-ended exploration of cultural inventiveness and possibility, perhaps the moment for an efflorescence of culture in its second (more lit-crit) sense.

The various writers herein seek to dispense with easy truisms. These truisms may be the kind that offer packaged *descriptions* of a situation—postsocialism, “the new Peronism,” and the like—or they may be overly general *explanations* that do not stand the test of detailed ethnography. And authors respond to these kinds of challenges by accepting the puzzles and incoherence of the “reality” they found in the field and presenting them to us as such. Or they juxtapose otherwise separate bodies of theory to reveal new insights. Or they use the puzzles thrown up by their ethnography to reshape existing concepts. So what we are witnessing are multiple techniques that help not just to enhance our conceptual tools but also to give them resilience.

Reading through these highly varied articles does not reinforce what little faith I may have had in the current trend to prioritize the role that “governmentality” plays in people’s subjectivities. To the contrary, it seems to me that, from the evidence here, anthropologists are (re-)discovering the messy and unpredictable role of myriads of people in the shaping of history—and of course the ever-more-awful attempts of those threatened thereby to reestablish order, direction, “security.” That word again, its multiple ironies well rehearsed by its association with “care” in the Special Section of this issue and its association with “terror” in the Forum Section, edited by August Carbonella. Ironies that hardly grow less stark in Bowman’s separate Forum article on the Israeli “Security Fence,” which cuts off Palestinian communities from their life-giving wider placements and deepens the propensity of the Israeli state to terrorize others anywhere on the globe on behalf of a “national interest” not less grossly inflated than the one indulged in by its American patron.

A particularly disturbing phenomenon explored by the articles in the Forum symposium on the militarization of anthropology is the dubious role of the notion ‘culture’ and the way its (mis)use by anthropologists produces weird ‘cultivations’ in the hands of others. Both authors in the symposium point up the distortions that arise when anthropologists use forms of cultural explanation without any serious examination of power. Both contributors note how the current conjuncture arises in part from changes in two seemingly separate institutions, on the one hand the academy, and on the other the military, the latter now showing a growing interest in knowledge about “culture” as a tool in military imperialism. And this at a time when academic careers are unstable and the academy itself is undergoing a transition with an uncertain outcome.

But surely what is especially interesting is that word “culture” again. The authors tell us that the military’s interest in “culture” though not new, is certainly part of a changed form of warfare. But two things strike me, and both

have implications for the profession [in both its meanings] of anthropology. The first thing is the rather creepy realization that a better knowledge of British or American culture on the part of the people of Afghanistan or Iraq would not help them one hell of a lot in their struggles against the occupying armies. Or, perhaps better put: They do not need a degree in anthropology to acquire the necessary knowledge of what the relevant features of those cultures are for them right now. The second is that at least as far back as the Greeks and Romans it has been assumed that war and empire are better undertaken with as sophisticated an understanding of the people you are fighting or colonizing as possible. So surely the interesting question is not that an imperial army wants to enhance this knowledge, but that it gives the knowledge it needs a specific name: “culture.”

If knowledge is power, what kind of power are these anthropologists offering their paymasters with the promise of knowledge of other people’s “culture”? Seen in this way, culture understood without reference to power seems less of a problem than the fact that an interest in other people’s cultures can serve to obscure the brute fact that in the last analysis that interest is only preliminary to, and for the purposes of, eliminating the people who practice it.

—Gavin Smith

### Notes

1. On Chambers Reference Online: <http://www.chambersharrap.co.uk/chambers/features/chref/chref.py/main>.