

Sense and Sensibility: Modern Anthropology in a Posthuman World
or
Listening Well to the Globalization of Discontent
by
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First, I'd like to thank you all for coming this afternoon, or thank you for staying if you are amongst the hardcore anthro-geeks who have been here for much of the past two days. It warms my sour old heart to know there are young people out there who get off on the idea of doing anthropology. I think you're crazy, but crazy in a way that is inspiring.

Thanks in particular to the organizers—the geeks amongst the geeks, the most wacko of the crazies-- who have put this conference together. Organizing anthropologists is like teaching worms to sing; while ultimately futile, it can be entertaining if your sense of a good time is warped enough. You are all beautifully warped and we have all benefited from your efforts. And finally, thanks for having me back again this year to talk. I was out here for the first of these California Undergraduate Anthropologist events and I am both stupefied and thrilled that you have not only declined to seek a restraining order against me, but instead have asked me to talk again.

You know not what you have done; I am a dangerous man with a microphone. And in this forum I am especially dangerous as my assignment is to send you off with a bang. Your organizers are quite concerned that this be a positive bang, however, and if you know me at all then you also know that this is a terrible misalignment of assignments. I am not a positive person. On an existential level, and a political and economic and environmental one, I am quite sure we are all doomed. At one point I even started a religious order called the “Church of Despair” with a political wing which was the “The People for Doom”). Can you imagine? We were only trying to match the tax exempt status of the Christian Coalition, but it should tell you something that my contribution to religious politics was an organization that did not agitate for the death penalty, but instead advocated for death itself. Our rituals involved cheese puffs and used motor oil, but I can't go into that. The only other person to ever join my religion is now dead, which, again, colors my sense of where we're all heading.

Anyway, I've mellowed since those days and will try to make today's talk slightly more rosy, but it won't be easy. As near as I can tell our democracy is convulsing from a crack-like addiction to corporate money, our environment is degraded to the point we'll soon be counting laboratory rats as wildlife and golf courses as protected open space, our universities—which at one point were at least *said* to be concerned with the training of sensible citizens—are now openly declared giant job training factories where CEOs and government apparatchiks tell us what to teach. Our main goal is now to sharpen your spikes so you don't slide into the social class below. Yes, clearly the whole planet is doomed, not just you and me. So it is probably apparent why you were more than a little nuts to elect me as the one to send you off with hearts full of fire and minds lusting for an incandescent anthropological future that smells like vanilla candles and looks like ripe fruit, free beer, and naked Gap models. But I will try.

My plan is to begin with a few words about political economy and what we might call the political economy of knowledge production. I know Geoff Mann did some of this yesterday, and more sagely than I shall, but it's necessary to give my view of it so you'll see why I'm so worked up. That done, I want to move to your conference theme of "modernity" and talk some about a parallel sort of *nouveau lumpencategory*, "globalization," a word I despise, but one that I think you need to learn to cope with since it seems everyone now believes that everything is not just global, but globalized. This obviously includes anthropology.

My argument will be that the main product of our social order is discontent. That is, to start with, I believe that the most notable emission of our late capitalist economic system is widespread ennui. I am not alone in noticing this, of course. Durkheim, Tonnies, Weber, Marx, the band Sublime –just about everyone who has ever thought about "modern" life has come to the conclusion that it comes down not only to the numb production of vast oceans of crap, but also weird idea that this crap can salve the pale misery induced by the production of the crap in the first place. I should warn you that by this point in my talk many of you will have used your Chinese-made Bic pens to puncture your American carotid arteries and will be quietly bleeding yourselves to death in your seats. Others will have tried self-suffocation with those free bags grocery warehouses use for incarcerating vegetables. I want to urge you to resist suicide, however good your reasons may be, because the upbeat part of the talk comes at the end. To end my talk I will give you the secret to a fruitful and meaningful life. (You see, I am not completely out of the religion business!) I can't give these insights away to soon, however, I first have to scare you, depress you, humor you, and send around a collection plate, but I will give you a hint: the secret to life involves anthropology. Yes, the fate of the world hinges upon your creaky old, colonialist discipline, with its delaminating four fields, and total intellectual paralysis before its most fundamental concepts, like culture. But here also lies our secret....

First: Political Economy and the Political Economy of Knowledge Production

I am a recalcitrant materialist, which is to say that I can't stop myself from beginning with political economy. I know, there are lots of other ways to slice a cake, but for me it makes sense to begin with how the cake gets made in the first place.

The Oxford English Dictionary (online) says of political economy that it was, "originally the art or practical science of managing the resources of a nation so as to increase its material prosperity; [but] in more recent use, [has become] the theoretical science dealing with the laws that regulate the production and distribution of wealth." The whole "laws" part of this definition is suspicious, as I have not noticed much in social life that follows laws very assiduously, but "managing resources" to "increase material prosperity" does not sound completely insane. It's especially sensible if you think of when the OED's "originally" might have been: say, Scotland in the 18th and early 19th centuries. I don't know heaps about this place and time, but according to what I've read, the notion of "political economy" evolved in this moment of spectacular intellectual florescence in a fairly miserable place. This was time when big-brained Scots swarmed madly about one of the poorest countries in Europe, got drunk in the morning, and argued, lectured and wrote all the time about ideas that would come to make the

modern world. These are the people whom I consider my ancestors, the people who, long before Hunter Thompson, made it clear that if you leave all the thinking to boring, sober people you end up with boring, sober ideas and a boring sober society. This, I'm afraid, is what we are facing now. We are a world trapped in a twelve-step program and life is one long bad meeting. I wanted to begin this talk by saying, hello, my name is Dave, and I am addicted to not being bored. I have a feeling this may be a crime.

But this old Scotland place was different from my world, and not just in terms of its per capita alcohol consumption or the cultural accommodation of the concept of a "breakfast claret" that led to it. Aside from the abundant booze, this seems to have been a world of lack, at least compared to the one we know, a world freighted with fears of crop failure and flood, disease and disability, when each single shoe had to be hand built from scratch and every fiber of every pair of socks was carefully assembled by some human's hands toiling in a lightless and unheated garret. White folks had not, at this point, outsourced so much of their misery to tropical places. In such a world, a world where the poor lived cheek by jowl with the rich and where even the rich didn't have clean toilets, refrigerators, vaccines, or easy access to Trader Joes, the problem of increasing overall wealth—the overall quantity of stuff in society—was of obvious concern. Not only was there no Wal-Mart, there were no antibiotics, no iPods, no Cancun spring break. All too often life was all too short and I suppose it was hard to imagine what you even *could* want beyond a warm house, short winters, reasonable amounts of leisure, food unpopulated with microfauna, and of course, a decent beer for your midmorning break. But there was a lack even of these modest desirables and the person we most associate with articulating a way to overcome this lack and increase the wealth of nations was, of course, Adam Smith.

Now, Adam Smith is not much read by anthropologists. He's the bad guy, the one rapidly lionized in economics, and while I can understand the sentiment behind this, it is still unfortunate. Sure, Smith was grouchy at dinner parties, he talked infrequently, but once started he wouldn't shut up; he was not one of the better partier-philosophers in my view, and, worse but not necessarily unrelated, he became the high priest of what we now call capitalism, that is, the economic system that is presently engulfing the entire planet. Because anthropologists often work with societies devastated by this whole capitalism thing, it is no surprise that Adam Smith pisses us off. But this is sort of blaming the messenger. I would suggest that grouchy A.S. was not nearly so unaware of the complexities of the issues he raised as are many of his acolytes today. Smith was concerned, for instance, with what he called the "bad effects of commerce" and the terrible costs involved in the hyper-specialization of labor. While on balance Smith believed that the benefits of unbridled commerce outweighed the costs, he does not sound like the delusional architects of contemporary IMF policies. It is these present-day gnomes who yatter breezily about the destruction of people's lives—real lives of real human beings-- as structural readjustment "medicine" to be taken for the benefit of "the economy," whatever that is. In fact, in my view the IMF / World Bank seem to promote policies eerily analogous to early Stalinist plans for a glorious future just beyond the immediate destruction—the sadly, terribly unfortunate but *necessary* destruction—which, as always, means necessary for somebody besides the people living in Washington, D.C or Moscow. Granted, the IMF / WB people invert some aspects of the Stalinist model, but the logic of violent, blind and baseless optimism is the same. By contrast, Adam

Smith writes that “In all commercial countries the division of labor is infinite, and everyone’s thoughts are employed about one particular thing.... The minds of [such] men are contracted, and rendered incapable of elevation. Education is despised, or at least neglected, and heroic spirit is utterly extinguished” (quoted in Herman 2001:220).

Utterly extinguished! Now, what does this sound like to you? As near as I can tell this Smith guy was right on –and not just about the “Causes of the Wealth of Nations,” but the consequences. Smith isn’t arguing here that capitalism by itself will produce a free and satisfied liberal populace, only that it will produce lots of stuff and will, on balance, be better than the miserable time he was writing in. Some of the by-products of all this stuff-production were easy enough to see even in the 1700s, but we are now being devoured by locust storms of “contracted minds” and our only protection lies in a notably unheroic culture. The leaders of powerful nations are not only venal thugs and religious fanatics “incapable of elevation,” but are often incapable of sensible communication! Education remains the holy saving grace of you undergrads scrambling to avoid life as a Denny’s hostess, but education has also, ironically, become the scapegoat for all that even might go wrong with the Capito-Stalinist future, at least according to the vicious apologists of this New World Order. Scholars, who, let’s face it, have almost no effect on anything, are nonetheless castigated by oxycontin-addicted talk show hosts for distracting you desperate undergrad masses from your singular pursuit of profit. And a few of us –who really ought to be exterminated, slowly, as enemies of freedom— a few even to ask you to question where this whole pursuit of profit thing is taking us. I’ll get to that later.

For now I’ll just say that in terms of political economy, it is no surprise that thoughtful Dead White Men –the very same Dead White Men we Lefties skewer for launching this fever we live in—these men were not ignobly concerned with how to generate more prosperity, how to unleash human ingenuity stultified by centuries of brutal labor under mulish hereditary landlords. It was not, at the time, very clear how to solve this. As his father was a customs inspector and young A.S. grew up watching smugglers outwit his dad, this Smith Jr. (and others) struck upon the idea that greed –in this case, the desire for profit—this greed might act as a brake upon the other passions, like laziness, sloth, or even lust, and it might in fact be the key to a unleashing not just a mania of productivity but actual social benefits like autonomy of action and even democracy. Smith argued that since rich people would always want more than they could physically ingest, their mad accumulation would spill over and make everyone the richer. This is to say, as Sandy Robertson argues,¹ that the limitations of the body were, at one time, key to a theory of general good coming from capitalist organization.

According to this view, the upshot of everyone pursuing what we have come to call “self interest” will be an “invisible hand” that will kindly and blindly organize the world. It is the economic counterpart of “natural selection” in evolution and is thus not exactly a God kind of hand, but a force something like gravity that would keep everyone stuck together and rolling forward in this dizzy hunger for *more*. This is where the idea of “laws” of political economy comes from. As such, Smith combines a theory of human nature with a theory of economic growth to produce a result that has, I think, become the central metaphor at the core of our civilization, and now, maybe, our planet. To the old story of marching out of Eden into the corrupt world and then on to heaven we now

¹ See “Greed” by A.F. Robertson.

march out of school, into the corrupt world and on to material prosperity. We still all seem to believe we are *going* somewhere and that the whole world is on a track, more or less the same track, and the real issue is who is getting on the bus how and when and how far they're going to ride. This is what people mean when they talk about "tradition" and "modernity," it's what they mean when they ask how "developed" a society is.

True, you anthropologists are certainly thinking, this notion of humanity as a monomaniacal *homo want-more-icus* seems a bit thin, and the idea that some "invisible hand" is gently coddling us into a coherent society seems a teensy bit naïve, especially given our ringside seat to the capitalist-driven destruction of everything from American Indians to the ozone layer. Even oxymoronic "compassionate conservatives" can't show how an invisible hand covers anyone's naked ass who has failed to profit, who has been too lazy, too stupid, too old, or too unlucky to drag herself or himself on to the bus of progress, or who has inadvertently got off at the wrong stop. Many of our domestic most-impoverished are, in any case, children. And in fact the most recent extraterritorial experiment meant to demonstrate that a "free market," corporate-dictated free for all would spontaneously generate a free society was in Iraq, and I think we can see how that's going. The "invisible hand" seems to depend upon an iron fist (as noted, and celebrated, by Thomas Friedman).²

But back to Scotland, where the point is that however mangled the message became later, it was not necessarily the fault of Adam Smith and his brilliant, dipsomaniac interlocutors. Smith was, I think, essentially right that something like self-directed effort rewarded by something like a meritocracy made much more sense than feudalism and crass nationalist and sub-nationalist atavism, at least in terms of *generating* wealth. There was not much discussion about how to distribute the wealth once it was made. That was a matter for a later generation.

And later generations had much to say about this. Liberal economic theories made some sort of sense in soggy old Scotland of the 18th century, but we all know what happened as the English got hold of these ideas and turned London in the 19th century into the world's greatest economic powerhouse *and* a cesspit of misery and human debasement probably unequaled just about anywhere at any time. It was in this context we meet Karl Marx, his rich friend Frederick Engels, and the development of the strain of moral outrage we have inherited today as "critical theory."

Marx too had a theory of human nature—if I need to remind you why anthropologists should be interested in this—and Marx too grafted his idea of who humans are as a species to a theory of political economy. It is not the case that Marx was simply opposed to what the Liberals had to say. He understood very well the productive power unleashed by capitalism. I don't think he ever denied that as a system for generating the things of this world, nothing has been or maybe even could be better. The essential Marxian critique as I read it is simply that generating stuff is not necessarily the only point of an economy. In this sense, a central human product of capitalism (what Marx called "alienation") has come to operate as its fuel, and thus what we call capitalist relations form a positive feedback loop not unlike a nuclear chain reaction. The release of energy has been as awesome. The more our fellow thinking human beings are driven to do stupid, mindless jobs over which they have no control, the more "alienated" they become. The more alienated they become, the more they look for ways of building

² See Friedman in Tariq Ali's "Clash of the Fundamentalisms," p. 286-287.

