



## What is Historical Anthropology?

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### Abstract

The paper gives an outline of the concept of historical anthropology. In a historic survey it shows the specific interests of anthropology, a philosophical discipline created in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a self-reflection of man and his position in the world. Historical anthropology is a rather new development of this discipline influenced by scholars like M. Mauss, N. Elias, M. Foucault, and P. Bourdieu. At the center of its studies is situated man considered (1) with his material make-up of his bodily existence, (2) in his social life world which produces him and which he in turn reproduces in his activity of world-making, (3) as an object seen by his fellow men and an object of theoretical observations. As theories about man share with their object the historical nature, they too have to be perceived in a historical perspective.

My reflections here are an attempt to give an answer to the question of what historical anthropology is. Its subject is: man, with his specific material make-up, in his life world and living conditions, seen through the eyes of his fellow men, being made an object of philosophical studies. Each of the components of this explication of “anthropology” can be interpreted in a variety of ways and is subject to historical change.

- The material make-up of man is given by nature and connected with non-human nature. But the human body has an extraordinary capacity for learning; from its very start in life, it is capable of change through the actions of others as well as its own. While being constrained to the original conditions of its biological nature, it is a product of its own making. However remote its constructions may tend to be – they will never gain complete autonomy; the relation is always there. Therefore, the only knowledge that anthropology can be expected to produce is localized, linked up with a certain place and time, rather than universal. The constructions of man cannot be contemplated as independent from their genesis; they remain





connected with inner-world man. Anthropology, rather than sever the ties which bind those constructions to the life world, makes them visible.

- The world human beings live in is already there when they are born, providing their biological, material and social environment. It is this environment that makes man, forms him, educates him and teaches him. These influences, however, are not met with passive acceptance, but brought to bear through active participation. Each human being changes the world in which it is born. Man makes this world his, absorbing it, incorporating it into his body and his actions. In the movement of subjectivation, the self produces its world, but never without the opposite movement, the movement of objectivation: the actions of man, his social acts, his institutions, his language, his symbolical media in general, give the world its objective form.
- The fact that human beings are seen by other human beings seems, at first, a rather commonplace fact of everyday life; we all see others and are seen by them; this is part of our condition as human beings. Given the part of reflection inherent in every act of seeing, men are 'natural born anthropologists'. Anthropology as a philosophical discipline does not reject everyday observations, reflections, interpretations and evaluations, but relies on them as objects of its theorizing, integrating them into a scientific context.

This theoretical perspective on man, characterized by these three complex features is part of the very foundations of anthropology. This is true, by the way, for every kind of philosophy which conducts reflection on man in terms of man himself, that is, not in terms of ideas, the universal, the eternal, and not from an omniscient point of view. Man is the subject and the object of anthropology. He only exists in relation to others whom he resembles and relates to through his actions. Again, this assumption can be interpreted in a variety of ways, depending on how the fundamentals and the instruments of anthropology are seen: whether they are assumed to be exempt from the movement of





history, or embedded in it. If they share the historical nature of their objects, there is a double historicity: not only the objects, but also the way of treating them are the result of arguments which, in a given historical and social setting. This is no preaching of relativism, but a refuse to take up a normative stance or universal perspective.

Thus, what we call “historical anthropology” is an anthropology which takes into account its own historicity as part of its theorizing. It can be seen as the common denominator of the works of various authors such as Elias, Vernant, Bourdieu; of these, some have themselves opted for this classification, while others, such as M. Mauss, Horkheimer/Adorno and M. Foucault, have not done so themselves, but may be subsumed under it with at least some aspects of their work.

The initial question for this kind of anthropology is not: what can I know? but: how have I come to know what I know? First, we have to define the object of anthropology for ourselves as well as for others; we have to make clear our perspective on man and on the requirements of human life and human knowledge. We have to find reasons for our way of questioning and of constructing our theoretical objects. What is it that makes people an object of anthropological knowledge, and from what points of view? We cannot but admit that anthropology is determined by the point of view taken, but only under the condition that our next step is to objectivate reflection. Starting out from localized thinking, we search for a way which leads to such transsubjective public discourses and concepts that allow us to compare individual cases.

Contrary to what may impose itself as a first impression, the concept of “anthropology” is an original creation of the historical epoch of the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> century; during this period, it became the “title of a philosophical discipline”<sup>1</sup>. Emerging in an age of political unrest and individual uncertainty, it can be interpreted as a new turn of

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<sup>1</sup> Masquardt, O.: “Anthropologie”, In: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Gründer, K./Ritter, J., Darmstadt 1971.





thought, directing it towards man himself. And it is man under the conditions of human life that will remain the object of anthropology. We can distinguish three historical stages of anthropological philosophy. In the beginning, there is a manifest search for a new approach to the reflection on man, dissociating itself from the old theology-based models and, while still keeping to the ancient authors as its frame of reference, already clearly emphasizing the fact that the self in its world, a world the forming of which is a joint effort with other human beings, is a serious object of reflection. As a variety of influences have acted on the emergence of this way of thinking, limitation of the anthropological horizon to the realm of philosophy would be an inadmissible simplification. With the onset of the age of Enlightenment, the philosophical discipline of “anthropology” is being spelled out – hardly accidentally, but as an expression of a new self-consciousness which, by insisting on the universal basis of humanity, is laying the foundation of its political, ethical and epistemological thought. Enlightenment is, above all, elucidation of one’s own self, an exit leading into the open, the courage to “walk alone”, rejecting the guidance of others<sup>2</sup>. Since the age of Enlightenment, all the great philosophers have engaged in anthropological reflections. Some of them, such as Karl Marx in his early “Paris Manuscripts”, postulate ‘human nature’ as being the foundation of their philosophical thought. But for the systematical elaboration of anthropology, it takes the concepts of biology and the interaction with them, brought about, if only in Germany, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The German ‘Sonderweg’ continues in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, culminating in Philosophical Anthropology, particularly in the highly influential works of Plessner and Gehlen.

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<sup>2</sup> Kant, I.: Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung? In: *Kants Werke AkademieTextausgabe, Bd. VIII, Abhandlungen nach 1781*. Berlin 1968, pp. 33-42.





Taking a somewhat different direction, historical anthropology, while refusing to present a closed theoretical structure of anthropological thought, is oriented to societal and historical thinking<sup>3</sup>.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, anthropology started out as a self-reflection of man in a double sense: as a “knowledge of man”, it is a discovery of man’s “moral nature”; as a mental activity, it is autonomous thinking, exclusively conducted with human means, a philosophy operating from within the horizon of human life, seeking emancipation from theology, mythology and metaphysics<sup>4</sup>. Like the anthropological author himself, the object of his reflection is constituted by a life-history. They both belong to the human nature. This universal nature is what is sought for in the individual case, in one’s own life or in the life of others as presented in the literary form of biographies or portraits. In the early times, anthropology is not yet elaborated to form a philosophical discipline. But there is a new way of looking on man and a new way of speaking about his physical as well as spiritual nature and his living conditions, thus providing unquestionable evidence of an anthropological concern. It is a change towards self-based confidence, the only kind of confidence which still seems possible and which the world or God now fail to provide. In the solitariness of the anthropological situation, man engages in a dialogue with himself: accounting for himself, justifying his actions, making them understood, though not before God, but before the self, and in all this taking into account his living conditions for which man himself is only partly responsible. This dialogue with the self is the achievement of an age in which man begins to experience doubts about himself and to consider himself in what he is for himself, without referring to any hereafter, transcendency or eternity.

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<sup>3</sup> For an overview of themes of historical anthropology, see: Dressel, G.: *Historische Anthropologie. Eine Einführung*. Wien/Köln/ Weimar 1996; Gebauer, G./Kamper, D./ Lenzen, D./ Mattenklott, G./Wünsche, K./Wulf, Ch.: *Historische Anthropologie: Zum Problem der Humanwissenschaften heute oder Versuche einer Neubegründung*. Reinbeck 1989; Wulf, Ch.: *Vom Menschen. Handbuch: Historische Anthropologie*. Weinheim/Basel 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Marquardt, O.: *Schwierigkeiten der Geschichtsphilosophie*. Frankfurt/M. 1973, p. 124.





I may book, Montaigne tells the reader at the beginning of his “Essays”, you will see me in all my naturalness, in my simple, ordinary ways, without pretense and without artificiality, which is possible only because I, Montaigne, am portraying myself: it is the self that is the centre of and the constitutive condition for the anthropological point of view. There hardly is a more poignant description of the new concern with man.

Anthropological reflection is situated within the world – its quest is for the truth of man, undertaken from a point of view within the world and searched for in his self and his life-history as seen in the horizon of finiteness and with reference to other people.

Anthropology is, first of all, an expression of uncertainty. What is the destination of man, if this destination is in his own hand? For an uncertainty of this kind to be possible, a time must have come where people have the (intellectual and political) possibility of conceiving of themselves as autonomous persons: as individuals and as selves capable of taking their lives in their own hands. This is far from being the case at all times and in all nations. The starting point of my reflection on anthropology is the question of the person, the individual, the self. It is important to see that these three concepts are not “eternal” categories of human thought, but have emerged in Europe, through a long historical process. In the course of the centuries, “not only the simple feeling of ‘self’ emerged, but the representation and the concept which men living at various times have formed of it”<sup>5</sup>. With this thought, Marcel Mauss has prompted a great variety of works investigating the historicity of central anthropological categories<sup>6</sup>.

Anthropology is a historical enterprise, the prerequisites of which are not to be found in philosophy alone. A range of conditions must be fulfilled for it to exist: the pre-

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<sup>5</sup> Mauss, M.: Eine Kategorie des menschlichen Geistes: Der Begriff der Person des “Ichs”. In: Mauss, M.; *Soziologie und Anthropologie*, Frankfurt/Berlin/Wien 1978, pp. 221-252.

<sup>6</sup> See Carrithers, M./Collins, St./Lukes, St. (eds.) *The category of the person. Anthropology, philosophy, history*. Cambridge 1985. Sturma, D.: *Philosophie der Person. Die Selbstverhältnisse von Subjektivität und Moralität*. Paderborn et. 1997.





eminence of the individual in relation to its society; the evolution of categories in which the fact that the members of a community have a private space of their own is acknowledged; a certain degree of freedom for the individual to act in the public sphere, resulting in individual rights. These prerequisites can be crosschecked by the investigation of cultures which have different ways of constituting the individual person, or have failed to develop the concept of the person and the self, in the first place. It will have become clear by now that the question of the nature of man, even in its more sophisticated variations of engaging in a comparison of man and animal, is evaded here. Such comparisons will always tell us more about the animal world than about the world of man. What is particular to human beings as different from animals is their variety. For the gaining of knowledge about what men are for themselves, these differences are of far greater importance than anything they may have in common. The underlying unity of man is a matter of legal entitlements and legal rights, particularly the rights of man, and as such the objective of normative discussion. Anthropology, however, is no sub-discipline of law or ethics. It is concerned with empirical human beings and investigates how, from a given starting point, they have come to develop a variety of differences which, then, can be related to each other.

Is anthropology possible today, will it be possible in the future? Scepticism as to an emphatical interpretation of the concept of man seems appropriate. Could it be that the whole complex of man, individual and person has been assigned too pre-eminent a place in European history? Today, the concepts of autonomy, authenticity, free will, sincerity, self-determination, reflexivity seem to have become curiously obsolete. But the European concept of the person has not only been a construction. It has had an impact on action; it has been a model for the elaboration of high cultural values. If it is part of a myth, this myth is a highly effective one. The history of anthropology is also the history of how the concept of man was taken up as a problem. This history did not end with Foucault, as has





been argued. On the contrary, it starts again with him, he himself having been the one to conceive, for the subject, a new art of living in terms of an aesthetics of existence<sup>7</sup>.

In contemporary anthropological theories, man, under the conditions of electronical media, is conceiving of himself in a more and more unlimited and unconditional way. Whether man today can be more than a reflection of those self-made images of himself is a question which, for Vilém Flusser, has already been answered (and in the negative)<sup>8</sup>. But the history of anthropology does not come to a stop with simulation and virtual reality. There are countermovements and resistances, image-scepticism and criticism of the media, exaggerations of man's artificially ostentatiously acted out in an effort to fight this very artificiality; and there are, last not least, attempts to reconquer partial sensuousness. All these discussions about the image and the reality of man, however, carry the risk of seeing such common grounds as have been constructed by history disintegrate into small, fragmented, independent domains. Or so it seems, for actually all these movements have their place in the new political constellations that have emerged. What will really matter in the future is that will all these attempts to produce partial images of man, a consensus is reached over common frameworks for society.

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<sup>7</sup> See Foucault's last works on sexuality.

<sup>8</sup> See Flusser, V.: *Abbild – Vorbild*. In: Hart Nibbrig, Ch. (ed.): *Was heißt "Darstellen"?* Frankfurt/M. 1994, pp. 34-48.

