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Anthropology and the Predicaments of Holism

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Why Bother With Holism?

We remember seeing a T-shirt inscription once: "Anthropologists Do It in Context." It was part of a string of T-shirt inscriptions – perhaps inspired by the 1990s "Just Do It" advertising campaign by Nike – that used double entendres to describe professions: "Photographers Do It in the Dark" and "Landscape Gardeners Do It Horizontally." For most anthropologists, it is probably obvious what "doing it in context" means. Context is about locating descriptions of particular phenomena within a wider setting that throws light on these phenomena. It is about making sense of observations by connecting them to larger experiential, meaningful, cultural, functional, or social wholes. Context is about grounding data; about methodological, literary, and political circumspection; and about parts and wholes. Context, in short, is about holism, one of the hallmarks – along with ethnographic fieldwork and intercultural comparison – of social and cultural anthropology.

As hallmarks go, however, holism is an odd one. For one thing, it is not given that it means the same thing to all anthropologists – in fact, it is pretty clear that there is no easy consensus. Second, holism is a highly problematic concept, and has been so for several decades. The likely gut reaction of many contemporary anthropologists to a volume on holism is therefore that holism is a fraught term that is best avoided. Nevertheless, we will argue that in spite of its ambivalence and lack of consensus, holism is still at the heart of the anthropological endeavor and that contemporary qualms about the concept are in fact symptomatic of a new emergence and experimental approach to the anthropological tradition of holism. The contributions to this volume demonstrate the variety and critical depth of current attempts to engage and rethink anthropological holism.

For heuristic purposes, we will adopt a broad (and admittedly also somewhat vague) definition of holism. We take holism to mean that a phenomenon has meaning, function, and relevance only within a larger context, field of relations, or "world" (see Chapters 4 and 8). The term "context" derives from a hermeneutical tradition of textual interpretation and is an important part of a holistic perspective (Dilley 1999). This tradition that blossomed under the influence of Geertzian interpretative anthropology

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sees the act of interpretation as the establishment of a relation between parts and wholes: "Hopping back and forth between the whole conceived through the parts that actualize it and the parts conceived through the whole that motivates them, we seek to turn them, by a sort of intellectual perpetual motion, into explications of one another" (Geertz 1983: 134). Context in this sense became part and parcel of a cultural holism. Holism is not, however, synonymous with contextualization, and other anthropological traditions have their own kinds of holisms whose genealogies and internal ambivalences this volume explores: functional, structural, social, methodological, and experiential holisms.

Holism may be said to be foundational for modern anthropology in the early twentieth century. It is associated with the rise of modern anthropology, characterized by the centrality of ethnographic fieldwork; a variety of theoretical traditions, all of which aspired to understand other forms of social life as integrated wholes; and a particular form of realistic representation of these other life forms, typically using media such as the monograph and ethnographic film. At the same time, however, holism is notoriously problematic and vague. As a central anthropological cornerstone, as Marcus and Fischer noted already in 1986, holism "is currently undergoing serious critique and revision" (in Marcus and Fischer 1999: 23). The reason for this is the seemingly close relationship between holism, wholes, and totalization. This relationship has implicated anthropology, as Sahlins notes in Chapter 7 of this volume, in a theoretical "scandal" that has become increasingly apparent in recent decades. Anthropological holism, it seemed, came to be a postulate about rather than a search for wholes, conceived as totalities of culture, society, or ideology. The problem here was both epistemological-ontological (what anthropological theory was set up to capture and express) and methodological-practical (how fieldwork was delimited and conducted). The holism of anthropological theory and ethnographic practice, it became shockingly apparent, seemed geared toward asserting bounded, static, homogeneous wholes.

These problems are compounded by vagueness. Holism, Parkin notes, "seems to refer to any approach that embraces an undivided view of society and humanity, and so has little analytical worth" (2007: 3). Scandalously outdated, theoretically suspect, and conceptually vacuous, holism also appears to smack of New Age naïveté – and political correctness to boot – at a time when it seems that every scientist and their healer are turning "holistic" (Fodor and Lepore 1991; Smuts 1999; Caruana 2000; Diamond 2001; Esfeld 2001; Jackson 2003; Pellegrini et al. 2003).

Does it make sense to speak about anthropological holism under these circumstances? What insights does such a focus bring to an understanding of contemporary theory and practice in anthropology? We argue that it does make sense. In fact, we argue that looking explicitly at holism again – its history, its problems, and its (ab)uses, and the uncomfortable silences that often surround it – is an endeavor that is long overdue. It is also an endeavor that may tell us something about anthropology that we may not have realized as well as something new about where anthropology is currently going. Reflecting explicitly about holism provides, we suggest, a fruitful vantage point from which the state of the art of anthropological theory and practice can be considered in a new light. We take holism to be a heuristic concept, a vague but nevertheless useful label that helps us uncover and make explicit a central but contested concern in the style of inquiry we call anthropology.

Holism in Anthropological Self-Representation

Holism is, in textbooks and in anthropological self-understanding, frequently presented as a central part of "the anthropological perspective" (Eller 2009: 13), and it is often used to characterize the discipline in contrast to others (Nanda and Warms 2005). Nanda and Warms (2009: 6), for instance, put it this way:

> Anthropologists bring a holistic approach to understanding and explaining. To say anthropology is holistic means that it combines the study of human biology, history, and the learned and shared patterns of human behaviour and thought we call culture in order to analyze human groups. Holism separates anthropology from other academic disciplines, which generally focus on one factor – biology, psychology, physiology, or society – as the explanation for human behaviour.

This understanding of holism as a comprehensive approach to the human condition is widespread and is – in this formulation at least – closely connected to the American view of anthropology as comprising four subfields – cultural anthropology, physical anthropology, linguistics, and archaeology – which together allow a comprehensive, holistic view on humanity (see Chapter 6; Harris 1993; Kottak 2006). The four-field approach to holism is, however, only one of many streams of holism within the anthropological tradition. Holism has thus become central to a number of discussions about what anthropology is and where it is going. Two of these discussions concern the particular strength of applied anthropology – again, in relation to more narrowly focused disciplines (see Harris 1993: 428–9; Ferraro 2006: 14; Nanda and Warms 2007: 166–7) and in connection with reflections about the method of participant observation, often presented as the key characteristic of the discipline (Marcus 1998).

The practice of ethnographic fieldwork during which anthropologists live with and partake in the lives of their informants in order to get better observational data – hence the term "participant observation" – is seen as an important reason for the development of a holistic perspective (Kloos 1974: 169; Blok 1977: 49; Kottak 2006: 262–3; Nanda and Warms 2007: 60). Holism, as Marcus and Fischer note, is "one of the cornerstones of twentieth-century ethnography" (1999: 22–23). For a long time, the solidity of this "cornerstone" was founded on the legitimacy of exotic fieldwork. Because of the small scale of the societies they originally studied, so the argument went, anthropologists were better able to see the integration between life spheres that are seen as separate in more complex societies (kinship, religion, politics, and the economy). These separate spheres or domains should therefore be seen as parts of a social whole. Once it had been established as a genre, this holistic perspective also proved useful in other, more complex contexts where face-to-face relationships no longer are standard. Whether this assumed connection between ethnographic fieldwork and the development of holism is historically correct or not – we will argue that there are other factors at stake as well – the textbook image of anthropologists employing a holistic perspective is very much part of the anthropological self-image, as that which makes us unique. As Clifford Geertz has put it,

> The specialness of "what anthropologists do," their holistic, humanistic, mostly qualitative, strongly artisanal approach to social research, is (so we have taught ourselves to argue) the heart of the matter. (2000: 93)

This is an image about anthropology that has now been popularized outside of the discipline, in other disciplines, and among the wider public. Indeed, Geertz has noted the curious discrepancy that has come with this tendency to describe anthropology as a particular style of research associated with holism, namely, that it is turning out to be a highly successful way of promoting the discipline elsewhere while producing "a certain nervousness, rising at times to something near panic," within the discipline (2000: 94). Below we shall seek to explain the history of this nervousness, while also suggesting that it is pointing the way forward to a kind of anthropological holism that is constituted by neither light-headed panic nor smug confidence.

Despite the many references to holism, explicit reflections about holism have not been the rule in anthropology. If holism was a central axis in anthropology, it had more the character of being a totem pole than an elaborated theoretical dimension. Holism was an exclamation mark of the discipline, a watchword cried out, as Geertz has noted, at conferences and in general call to arms (2000: 97). But it was rarely elaborated on at any length in writing. For all its emotional force as a disciplinary totem, holism was rarely given theoretical depth. It is thus surprising how rarely holism was mentioned in what we would now see as its heyday in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. Thus, in most classical textbooks, either holism is not mentioned at all or its treatment is extremely cursory.[1] The centrality of holism in anthropological thought and practice cannot therefore be fully traced in the classic writings of the discipline. Of course, there are the *loci classici* of holism, which we deal with below and detail in Chapters 2, 6, 10, and 14 of this volume, but it is our strong impression that there is another, more hidden life of holism in the practice of teaching the discipline. Especially anthropology teachers who are now in their fifties or older remember that holism was one of the key terms used to characterize the discipline and its methods. But much of this is oral culture.

One of us recently discussed the issue with a well-known visual anthropologist who had been a student of Margaret Mead. For him the criterion of success of a good ethnographic film or book was the holistic representation of indigenous culture, and he emphasized that this has been one of the key themes in Mead's teaching. Asked where we could find this theme unfolded, he referred us to Mead's introductory text in *Principles of Visual Anthropology* (Hockings 1975). To our surprise, however, the word "holism" is not mentioned at all there. Although Mead refers briefly to holism elsewhere in her writings (see, for example, Mead 1953),[2] it was evidently much more central in Mead's teaching than in her writing. It was left to others to explicate it. Indeed, in his book on ethnographic film that he dedicated to Gregory Bateson and Mead, Karl Heider, another visual anthropologist, highlights holism as one of three central principles of ethnography – along with detailed description based on long-term fieldwork and the ideal of relating observed behavior to general norms – that are central to ethnographic filmmaking. For Heider, holism – understood as the need to understand things and events in their cultural and social contexts (Heider 2006: 6) – is a reminder of the importance of allowing the camera to capture "whole bodies, whole interactions, and whole people in whole acts" (Heider 2006: 114). Heider does not explicitly credit Mead for this importance of holism, but it is clearly part of the credo and tonality of the tradition of Franz Boas and Mead.

Anthropologists write, as Geertz has famously quipped (1973: 19). It would seem, however, that they do not write everything down. We argue that despite being one of the central tenets of our discipline, holism has been the object of talk rather than of writing. Just like anthropologists return from the field with written fieldnotes as well as unwritten "headnotes" (Ottenberg 1990), it would seem that holism for generations of anthropologists was a "headnote," a part of the common theoretical imaginary and corridor discourse that were central to a sense of métier and professional

identity but that only rarely and sporadically made it into theoretical writings. This headnote quality of holism, its existence as a totemic catchword for what anthropologists told their students, each other, and the rest of the world about what they did, rather than a theoretical term they reflected much upon in writing, was not restricted to North America.

In the English tradition, too, holism was around already at an early stage. In conventional accounts of the origins of "modernist" British anthropology, the rise of fieldwork-based (structural-)functionalism was thus associated with a "revolution" in which armchair anthropology and conjectural history were "rejected in favor of the discovery of holism and synchrony" (Strathern 1987: 258). The fragmented comparison of myth and ritual by Tylor and Frazer was replaced, so the story goes, by the insistence of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown that "practices and beliefs were to be analyzed as intrinsic to a specific social context; that societies so identified were seen as organic wholes, later as systems and structures; and that the comparative enterprise which modern anthropologists set themselves thus became the comparison of distinct systems" (Strathern 1987: 254). As Stocking and Strathern have shown, this idea of a fundamental revolution is a particular disciplinary fiction (Stocking 1983), but it allowed the rise of a new form of holism centered on fieldwork. This in turn generated a successful, but also largely fictional, break that rendered the evolutionist tradition, as Strathern suggests, "unreadable," while it made possible the discipline of modern anthropology (Strathern 1987: 269). If the revolution was a fiction, it was a persuasive one, for it recalibrated anthropological self-understanding as a scientific form of knowledge in all its aspects. Holism was thus related to new theoretical aspirations, to the new methodological imperatives of fieldwork, and to a new genre convention, all constituting novel standards of proper knowledge and valid representation.

Despite the importance of this paradigm shift for the self-understanding of modern anthropology, holism also rarely floated to the surface of written texts in British anthropology as a theoretical concept.[3] Hortense Powdermaker, for instance, mentions that she had been trained in a "holistic frame" by Bronislaw Malinowski at the London School of Economics; by this she means the new standard Malinowskian idea of holism described above, namely, that she would always put the issue or group studied in the context of its relations to other issues and groups (1971 [1933]: 8). She writes this in a later (1971) introduction to her ethnography on Lesu (from 1933), in which, typically we think, the term is not used at all.

It would seem, in other words, that as a cornerstone of twentieth-century anthropology, holism acquired the quality of an anthropological doxa. It appears to have been for a long time an aspect of anthropological practice and writing that was rarely discussed. It was something that did not need reflection in writing because it came "without saying," as Pierre Bourdieu has it (1977: 167). In the context of introducing novices to the discipline, it probably had a more prominent role, especially in the classroom. Holism was an anthropological tradition, and like all traditions it was mainly "silent, not least about itself as a tradition" (Bourdieu 1977: 167).

The Abject Heart of Anthropology

The 1980s, however, marked a break. Postmodern critique, a concern with pluralism and multivocality, the attack on totalizing theoretical paradigms, experiments with new forms of representation, and not least a changing world made holism as

an unarticulated ideal a problem. The wholes implicated by conventional holism – culture, society, ideology, social organization, and symbolic system – began to appear theoretically unsuitable and politically suspect. The 1980s, in other words, provided anthropology with a new language about itself. This included a hitherto novel way of being explicit about, and often highly critical toward, anthropological wholes and anthropological holism. Despite trenchant critique, however, holism lingered. New forms of holism (like globalization) emerged, and old ones (like culture) refused to disappear, perhaps because the anthropological style of inquiry depended on such notions (cf. Marcus, Chapter 3, this volume; Thornton 1988) and perhaps also because the human worlds studied by anthropologists were replete with them (see Tsing [Chapter 4], Holbraad [Chapter 5], Mosko [Chapter 9], Pedersen and Willerslev [Chapter 15], and Hirsch and Moretti [Chapter 16], this volume).

As a result of these changes over the last three decades or so, holism has now acquired an ambivalent, if still central, position in anthropology. Our own disciplinary fictions established holism as enduringly central to anthropological theory, practice, and self-representation, but left it vaguely articulated – part of programmatic self-definition rather than concrete analysis, and implicit in anthropological writings rather than explicitly formulated. The critique of recent decades added new complications. Critique lifted holism to the surface of our writings but as a problematic – even dangerous – anthropological idea(l). Bringing the concept into the light of reflexive scrutiny revealed its shadowy side, namely, the totalizing assumptions of the theoretical models and ethnographic representations based on this ideal.

As a consequence, we suggest, holism now has the status of being both central and abject in anthropology. Julia Kristeva calls abjection one of the "dark revolts of being" (2002: 389). It describes the process of throwing away or casting aside a part of self through which the self comes into being. It is by ridding oneself of the abject – a something that fails to be entirely named or captured – that one becomes a self in the first place. The abject is therefore not an object; rather, it is a something that simultaneously creates the borders of the self as an object and makes possible the self as a subject. Identity begins, in other words, with abjection. Using the example of food repulsion, Kristeva argues that it is through disgust, a corporeal vomiting, that identity is established: "I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself in the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself" (2002: 390). This claim, however, can be tenuous at best, and abjection cannot fully succeed. Since the abject is both part of myself and intolerable, my attempt to expel it from me is both necessary and impossible (Kristeva 1982). An illustrative pop image of abjection is the creature Sméagol in the Hollywood motion picture based on J. R. R. Tolkien's opus *The Lord of the Rings*. In the trilogy, Sméagol constantly has to stop midsentence to try to cough up or vomit out Gollum, his alter ego whose obsessive desire for the ring has consumed Sméagol. The name "Gollum" is derived from the sound of Sméagol's abjection, so the more he attempts to cough Gollum up, the more Sméagol becomes Gollum. Such is the irony of abjection.

One may disagree with the structural psychology that informs Kristeva's notion of abjection (Fraser 1990), but the notion of abjection is nevertheless helpful, we suggest, as a device through which to understand anthropology's ambivalent relationship to holism, and the way critique and disavowal of holism have seemingly not led to its successful expulsion. Instead, it would appear that the critique of the last three decades of the various forms that anthropological holism may take (culture, ideology, system, and society – abject wholes that have been easy to name but extremely difficult

to handle theoretically) has led not to the rejection of holism but to new forms of experimentation with and reflection on holism that are contributing to the reinvention and rethinking of the discipline.

Holism, we suggest, is emerging as the abject whose impossible expulsion from the center of the discipline makes anthropology once again possible, tenuously, in the contemporary world. The critiques of old forms of wholes, we suggest, have become part of a redefinition of disciplinary identity, and with this redefinition have come new forms of theory and practice – new ways of doing anthropological theory, analysis, and fieldwork and new ways of relating to texts, to informants and collaborators, to readers, and to power. We are now in a moment when critique itself appears inadequate and when we are concerned to be critical while "getting on with anthropology" (Metcalf 2002). Under these circumstances, holism has become the abject heart of anthropology, a problematic part of our self-identity of which we have sought to purge ourselves but without which our discipline apparently cannot exist.

The current moment is therefore accompanied by an array of experiments with new forms of holism that remain imbedded in modernist anthropology but that also seek to be better attuned to new global conditions and new disciplinary practices. This book brings together a range of different experiments in holism that critically deal with the anthropological tradition but in new and challenging ways show the continued but also fraught relevance of a holistic perspective. The contributors discuss the varied heritage, current challenges, and critical potential of holism by lodging their discussions within concrete ethnographic analyses. In doing so, they suggest a variety of ways in which holism might be reconceptualized, refashioned, and retooled as part of their own efforts to get on with anthropology and make it relevant for the present world.

A Brief History of Holism

The anthropological ambivalence concerning holism is at least partly grounded in the history of Western social, political, and scientific thought and the way the concept of the whole made its entry into the discipline. We cannot pursue the intellectual history of Western holism in any detail here, but we would nevertheless like to highlight two important moments in Western political and scientific thought, namely, the birth of individualism in the seventeenth century and the rise of holism in the life and human sciences at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the outset, we should make it clear that we use holism in a wide sense to indicate theories that emphasize wholeness or collectiveness. The term "holism" itself was very likely coined or at least popularized by the South African statesman Jan Christiaan Smuts (Harrington 1996: xxii; Smuts 1999 [1926]) in the 1920s. In the early texts of the founding fathers and mothers of anthropology, words like "complex whole," "the whole phenomenon," "total social fact," and "collective representations" are found throughout, but it is only retrospectively that their theories have been called holistic.

Looking for the intellectual origins of the concept of holism, one could argue that Western individualism and holism (in the shape of collectivism) were born as a conceptual pair. In the work of the seventeenth-century philosophers Thomas Hobbes and especially John Locke, individuals are defined as the natural proprietors of their own persons and capacities, not owing anything to society for them. For this individualism to be able to exist as a social form, however, individuals have to accept a supreme

state that protects individual property and therefore transcends the rights and powers of the individual. The individual is therefore necessarily encompassed by a legal and economic whole that is more than the sum of its parts, namely, all the individuals who are subjects of the state. In the liberal tradition, "possessive individualism" (Macpherson 1962) and holism, in other words, logically imply each other, although the dominant, explicitly stated value is that of individual freedom and choice.

Both the individual, a free and equal actor on the marketplace, and the whole upon which sovereignty is based – the state – are presented as bounded wholes, but the existence of the latter is legitimated with reference to the existence of the former. This hierarchical relation supports the central observation by the anthropologist Louis Dumont (1977, 1986) that individualism is the dominant value in modern Western culture. Interestingly, Dumont assumes that most non-Western societies are characterized by the opposite value hierarchy, with the whole being dominant over the individual. This is what he calls "holism" and opposes to Western individualism. Dumont's work has inspired a great deal of comparative ethnography supportive of his thesis,[4] as well as fierce criticism aiming to break open this central dichotomy (see Chapters 11, 12, and 13, this volume), but important for the present argument is that his comparative framework echoes concepts that are inherent in Western thought and are informed by Western political practice. In line with this, as Richard Handler (1988), among others, has pointed out, the political tradition of possessive individualism articulated well with modern ideas of "possessive culture," a concept developed to explain the role of culture in the construction of national – and ethnic – identities. In this view the nation-state, conceived as an individual-writ-large, constitutes its bounded individuality – a whole – through the ownership of its unique culture (cf. Harrison 2006). We may thus observe a conspicuous historical convergence between the modernist anthropological project of understanding culture as a holistic phenomenon and that of nationalist movements all over the world aiming to create holistic and bounded cultures to establish their separate identities.

The liberal roots of holism notwithstanding, from the inception of modern anthropology the concept of the whole primarily served the function of allowing the discipline to critique this same liberalism. Anthropologists thus often conceptualized the kinds of wholes in which other people lived their lives in critical contrast to life in the West, which was understood as being – for better or for worse – institutionally and existentially fragmented. The wholes – social, cultural, structural, and materialist – that early-twentieth-century anthropologists saw in the lives of others were all meant to undermine the taken-for-granted assumption in the West about the relationship between the individual and society. Indeed, all the major traditions of anthropological thought since the early twentieth century insisted that Western ideas of the individual self were inadequate, even misplaced, and that religious systems, social functions, structures of kinship, and modes of production meant that the analysis needed to begin at the level of society or culture as a whole. This criticism of Western individualism – simultaneously epistemological, political, and moral – is arguably inherent in the rise of individualism as an ideology (as its counterpoint, so to speak) and was developed by the early modern anthropologists at the beginning of the twentieth century in their study of non-Western life worlds.

The turn to a holistic understanding of society and culture, accomplished by scholars such as Boas, Malinowski, Durkheim, and Mauss, was not an isolated phenomenon within the emerging discipline of anthropology. In the relatively young discipline of sociology, there was a similar concern with the impact of individualism on modern

society as famously expressed by Ferdinand Tönnies' (1912 [1887]) conceptual opposition between a *Gemeinschaft* (a holistic community with shared values) and *Gesellschaft* (a community of individuals). This conceptual opposition was reinforced by another contrast that was engendered by the success of modern science in the nineteenth century and the concomitant industrialization of Western economy and society. The metaphor of the machine as a model for proper knowledge, not only of physical nature but also of life, mind, and society, was gaining wide support, due to the evident successes of physics and engineering. This led, however, to a reaction among a number of biologists, neurologists, and psychologists at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. This reaction against the metaphor of the machine was articulated as an emergent fascination with holism, a tendency that was particularly strong in German-speaking countries even though it was by no means restricted to this cultural area (Harrington 1996).

Whereas the sociologist Max Weber lamented but ultimately accepted the (for him) unavoidable disenchantment of modern science, biologists like Jakob van Uexküll, neurologists like Constantin von Monakow and Kurt Goldstein, and Gestalt psychologists like Max Wertheimer worked to redefine – and reenchant – their science by means of a dominant concept of wholeness (*Ganzheit*). In opposition to the pervasive mechanic worldview, which they found lacking in explanatory power as well as moral orientation, they introduced concepts like *Umwelt* (environment or context), organic wholeness, and psychological Gestalt. Harrington (1996) emphasizes how this new holistic science not only had an internal scientific motivation and dynamic, but also became entangled with the political developments of the time. In particular, some of the holistic ideas of this new science articulated well with the emerging ethos of Nazism and thus became enmeshed with anti-Semitism. This is not to say that academics who were fascinated by the notion of wholeness necessarily had leanings toward this political ideology; quite a few, for example the Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Köhler (Ash 1998), were in open opposition to the fascist regime and were forced to leave German academia. But the holistic ideas could be adapted to support a totalitarian regime and its exclusive ideology, thus showing the shadow side of holism: its potential, if used uncritically, to totalize and exclude alternative explanations and worldviews.

Although cultural and social anthropologists mostly steered clear of Nazi totalitarianism and more often than not were in ideological opposition to it – Boas' criticism of the concept of race is a case in point – the genealogy of holism makes it clear that it is prone to be used in totalizing ways. The recent upsurge of fundamentalist ideas about religious incompatibility, ethnic cleansing, and the clash of civilizations comprises examples of holistic concepts gone wild as totalizing devices (Stolcke 1995). Indeed, part of the recent critique of the anthropological concepts of culture, ethnicity, and society concerned the way they have assumed a politically totalizing character in the world that makes their analytical use politically suspect (Clifford 1988; Abu-Lughod 1991; Brightman 1995; Fox and King 2002).

The Scope of the Book

Three decades of critique of anthropology – born as a discipline with a notion of holism that has both a problematic heritage and a critical potential – have forced the discipline to look at itself afresh. What – if anything – is left of anthropological holism

as a style of research in the wake of this critique? We think that the contemporary theory and practice of anthropology demonstrate that a great deal is left. The critique has deconstructed the totalizing aspects of holistic perspectives but has thereby generated the debris with which anthropology is now experimenting, putting the pieces together in new ways, joining the holisms of various theoretical traditions in new ways – bricolage-like within their own practice.

What forms and aspects of anthropological holism were wrongly dismissed or retained, and what are in dire need of rethinking? Can anthropological holism be salvaged by new kinds of theory, or does holism itself constitute a kind of practical theory? Does anthropology need to forget holism, or has it not been holistic enough? These are some of the questions that run through the contributions to this anthology.

If nothing else, we hope this introduction has demonstrated that holism is much more than cross-disciplinarity (cf. Parkin and Ulijaszek 2007). Holism, as we see it, is rather a style of research that has been inherent in anthropology since its birth as a modern discipline in the early twentieth century but has a genealogy that can be traced back to and is entangled with some of the major traditions of Western social theory. It was appropriated by anthropology exactly to transcend the ideological limits of these social theories. And the predicament of this heritage has stayed with the concept even as it was lodged within a variety of anthropological theories and practices. In this book, we use holism, therefore, as a diagnostic device. It is a device that allows the contributors not only to critically engage this complex heritage, but also to look ahead to the future of anthropology. The contributions to this volume offer a broad – and we think broadly representative – selection of contemporary experiments in holism. Being anthropologists, the contributors conduct these experiments mostly in nonconformist, often idiosyncratic ways that are concerned less with the production of a new common theory or solution than with trying to understand their own ethnographic material. This volume, therefore, seeks to query the state of the art of contemporary anthropology through the prism of holism, and to debate the future of anthropological forms of holism. It does not offer a new paradigm of holism but presents a palette of the different ways in which the paradigms of yesteryear are being deconstructed and reconstructed across conventional boundaries to critically rethink the problems of old forms of holism while maintaining and reviving the critical potential that all forms of anthropological holism harbor.

The contributions to this volume suggest that it is time to move beyond the nervous, even panicky, relationship that Geertz felt anthropologists maintained with their heritage of holism (2000: 94). The contributions are all highly critical of the various traditions of holism out of which they grew, but they use this critique to launch a series of experiments in holism that point toward the possibility that anthropology can be holistic without being totalizing, that there can be holisms without wholes. It is therefore an invitation to open reflection and experimentation with the holisms that continue to guide – and haunt – anthropology.

Despite the general willingness to experiment with holism, there is among the contributors little consensus about how this should be worked out in practice. In part this heterogeneity is related to the diverse traditions of holisms that the contributions engage. As the volume will show, the four hegemonic kinds of holism within anthropology – the "methodological" holism of ethnographic fieldwork, cultural holism, structural holism, and social holism – were themselves never uncontested and were characterized by internal division and dissent. This complexity is further complicated when the contributors assemble new varieties of holism from this puzzle across disciplinary, national, and philosophical boundaries.

If there is something on which all contributions appear to agree, albeit in their different ways, it is the critical potential of holism, which makes it both central and essential to the anthropological endeavor. The contemporary critical potential of holism is both epistemological and culture-critical or -political. It is a necessary part of the anthropological style of knowledge, if this involves making sense of other people's actions and intentions. The critical potential of holism in this sense traverses, as Marcus suggests in Chapter 3, the entire process of anthropological knowledge production: from the holisms associated with fieldwork, via the holisms involved in anthropological reflexivity and representation, to the holisms involved in redesigning anthropological analysis and comparison. At the same time, the holistic ambition to decipher contrasting and contradictory "life worlds" gives anthropology a unique vantage point from which to reflect critically on the constitution of these worlds. In this lies a political ambition to transcend the situatedness of Western knowledge. Anthropological holism, if it is possible to speak of it in the singular, is in other words a style of inquiry and a way of putting context into academic play that affords a critical perspective on the conditions of anthropological knowledge itself.

At the same time though, all contributions are critical of aspects of the way holism has been used in the past, for example the construction of totalizing or reifying theoretical structures or the pursuit of exclusive identity projects. Holism is thus both an object and a necessary condition for anthropological critique. As such, it remains uneasily at the core of anthropological theory and practice – even after three decades or more of disciplinary self-critique. But, as many of the contributions suggest, holism should perhaps also be understood as part and parcel of human practice in general. When human beings act, they imagine – implicitly and explicitly – contexts in which their actions make sense and in which they and others figure as agents. These practical holisms vary in scale and scope and can be more or less totalizing in their effects. It is anthropology's difficult but socially and academically important task to critically illuminate, describe, and engage these holisms in the world.

The Structure of the Book: Four Kinds of Experiments in Holism

The volume is divided into four sections, each of which presents four broad varieties that current experiments in holisms may take. Contemporary anthropology, we suggest, may be divided into at least four different strings of experiments in holism that each engages a particular genealogy of holism: the holism in ethnographic representation and practice, cultural holism, structural holism, and social holism, respectively.

This division is not without its problems. A division between textual, cultural, structural, and social kinds of holisms clearly runs the risk of reviving conventional distinctions between American, German, French, and British traditions of anthropology and fetishizing national boundaries of anthropological theory and practice. Insisting on such national divisions would be unfortunate, because it would repeat a conventional anthropological historiography that ignored contacts, overlaps, and cross-influences. In fact, the contributions to each section demonstrate the global scope of contemporary reflections on holism. Tsing in Chapter 4, for instance, brings together Latour from France and Strathern from the UK to solve a problem of American and Japanese scholarship. In Chapter 11 Kapferer, an Australian living in

Norway, uses the theories of Frenchmen like Dumont and Deleuze to engage the heritage of the Manchester school. Nevertheless, even though anthropological ideas continually transcend national borders and disciplinary divides, the national histories of the development of these ideas and divides still matter, and it is evident that the reflections by our contributors on how the discipline should reorient itself to answer the challenges of the contemporary world do grow from a variety of different conceptions of holism, each with its own intellectual heritage, characteristics, problems, and potential.

A concomitant problem of the division we have chosen is that it is in danger of forgetting traditions of holism that fall between or outside these national spaces, either because they fail to easily slot into the four dominant kinds of holism (and here the ecoholism of Bateson is a prominent example; see Dudgeon 2008), or because they belong to "other" kinds of anthropology outside of the hegemonic Global North (Eades et al. 2004; Ribeiro and Escobar 2006). We have to admit in part to this kind of forgetting, if for lack of space rather than lack of will. The kinds of holisms the contributions critically engage are clearly hegemonic kinds of holism. It is, however, also this hegemony that makes a critical engagement with them all the more important. We think that the selection of contributions to this volume take on those genealogies of holism that have had a formative effect on anthropology on a global scale. It is, however, by no means exhaustive. There are clearly other possible experiments in holism than the ones conducted in this volume, experiments that grow more explicitly out of a critical engagement with ecology (Dudgeon 2008), with Marxism (Jay 1986; Shiell 1987; but see also Friedman, Chapter 13, this volume), with the natural sciences (Esfeld 2001; Parkin and Ulijaszek 2007), and with phenomenological or narrative theory (Weiner 1999; but see also Holbraad [Chapter 5], Bubandt and Otto [Chapter 14], and Pedersen and Willerslev [Chapter 15], this volume), to mention but a few.

In Part 1, the focus is on the implicit and explicit holisms that appear in the practice of ethnographic research and writing. It includes reflections on how an aesthetic of holism is fundamental to the design and execution of ethnographic projects, how the conception of what Anna Tsing calls "worlding" (see Chapter 4, this volume) informs the choices we make while tracing explanatory connections, and how the epistemological premise of holism in ethnography is the methodological *conditio sine qua non* for theoretical openness and creativity.

Part 2 takes up the heritage of the predominantly American and German tradition of cultural anthropology. This heritage has conventionally emphasized cultures as autonomous and sui generis wholes, a convention that has been under attack for decades. The outcome of what to do with culture is, however, still muddy. As a way of dealing with the challenges of this critique and incorporating it into a practical research agenda, the contributions discuss how a focus on these "wholes" might be decentered. One option, advocated by some of the contributors, is to show that "wholes" can only be understood within greater historical fields of mutually determining dependencies. Using insights from linguistics, they argue that "wholes" are defined not only from the theoretical perspective of the researcher (as in de Saussurean linguistic analysis) but also on the basis of political identity projects. An alternative option for a decentered approach to cultural holism, this section suggests, may be developed by using concepts from modern complexity theory, in particular the application of fractal holography to anthropological data.

In Part 3, the common ground for reflection and experimentation is the inspiration from the French structuralist tradition, with Louis Dumont as the centrally important

protagonist defending the relevance of a holistic approach. A thorough analysis of the Dumontian anthropological program of comparative analysis of value hierarchies and encompassments is the basis for an exploration of how this program can be developed to deal with transformations, events, and modern forms of subjectivity. In addition, the program is extended to map and compare different types of collectives, characterized by different ontologies concerning the relations between humans and nonhumans and the relative importance ascribed to interiority versus exteriority. Finally, the structural consequences of global interdependencies and political inequalities for cultural ontologies and identities are brought within a comprehensive analytical perspective.

Part 4 addresses the heritage of the predominantly English tradition of social anthropology, which conceives of social systems as organic, mechanical, cybernetic, or theatrical wholes. The contributors to this section all seek to discard the preconceived social wholes that come with what Tim Ingold (Chapter 17, this volume) calls the "painting" approach to anthropological description, an approach that seeks the totality to fill out all the blanks of the ethnographic picture. Instead, the contributions to this section seek to follow the connective loops of human actions and imaginations that "draw" the emergent lines of partial, temporary, and emic holisms. In order to grasp the holisms of human practice in concrete ethnographic situations – whether in relation to narrating the past (Hirsch and Moretti, Chapter 16, this volume) or in relation to joking the ancestors into their proper place (Willerslev and Pedersen, Chapter 15, this volume) – bold conceptual theoretical experiments are carried out, which give this brand of anthropology its particular innovative appeal.

Notes

1 There are, of course, exceptions. See, for example, Blok (1977: 49–69). This textbook deals with holism in a more comprehensive way by devoting a whole chapter to it. It argues that holism is one of four central perspectives that characterize anthropology. The other three are participant observation, the comparative perspective, and the development perspective.
2 The concept of holism is very central, but again in an implicit way, in Mead's monograph *New Lives for Old* (1956), which deals with how a culture does not change in a piecemeal way, but rather as a whole.
3 Again, there are exceptions. See, for instance, Gellner (1956).
4 See Barraud et al. (1994) for a Melanesian example.

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