



Beyond Agatha Christie: Relationality and critique in anthropological theory

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Abstract

Critical anthropological theory needs to be a theory of relationality. Only through a relational theory can we come to a perception of our fundamental commonality and conceptualise difference as being given significance by the unequal relations that we stand in towards each other. A relational theory needs concepts that reflect on the asymmetrical interdependence that shapes the dynamics of power relations, which give rise to institutions of 'significant difference'. I propose Luc Boltanski's notion of 'situation' as a concept that enables us to grasp the structured contingency that shapes our mutual interdependence. Situation, by making possible the micro-analysis of macro-relations, also provides the conceptual tools to think beyond that which is, towards that which is possible.

Keywords

commonality, critique, difference, figuration, relationality, situation

Critical thought is that which gives us the means to think the world as it is and as it could be. (Wacquant, 2004: 1)

I have recently engaged in debates about what some call the transfer of law: processes of the circulation of legal norms (e.g. Eckert et al., 2012). In the debates about the travels of legal norms, I have often found myself in interdisciplinary conversations. The central expectation from the expertise of anthropologists in these conversations was that we explain the Other. At times when more and more disciplines adopt some notion of 'ethnography', the ostensible idea of what social anthropology can contribute is expertise on 'the other'. This ranges from

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crude questions such as ‘how do these others – who are so different – function, so that we can write them a suitable constitution’, to refined and theoretically informed caution about the possibility of understanding and communicating. The former express worries about the fate of norms, which might be deformed, abused or undermined when they travel to places shaped by different social relations; the latter express worries about the fate of those subjected to these foreign norms. The first assume that each norm has an original template; the latter often assume a form of authenticity that presumes the normative homogeneity and integration of those perceived as different. Yet, neither of these positions addresses what social and political processes actually lead to the dominance of a norm, and the consequent processual structuring and regulation of social relations. Instead both focus on projections of foreignness.

‘Awe of alterity’, inherent in these perspectives as problematization or idealization of difference, leads us to see only difference in the other, and negates all that we share, which shapes our everyday human experience (Das, 2012: 328; Glick Schiller, 2012; Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2015), our fundamental commonality. Such awe of alterity, whether with positive or negative connotations, establishes all-encompassing differences, and stands in the way of addressing the constitution of alterity in social and political relations. It deflects from the analysis of the structural effects that give relevance to difference. Since such awe thus leads to the denial of what Nina Glick Schiller has called the ‘domains of commonality’ (e.g. 2015) and, consequently, de-socializes and essentializes difference, I see it as one of the foremost tasks of anthropological theory to theorize the sociality of difference. By the sociality of difference I mean the societal production of institutions that (a) produce specific forms of difference, and (b) give relevance to such difference.¹ Theorizing the sociality of difference, we can get hold of the ghosts that we called forth (Goethe, 1827: 218) when we struggled for the recognition of other social formations as valuable in their own right. Obviously, this latter endeavour has not been accomplished yet, and can only be accomplished in conjuncture with theorizing the sociality of difference, since any essentializing notion of difference easily lends itself to justifications of inequity. We thus have three intricately related tasks before us, namely, exploring our commonality, struggling for the equitable recognition of multiple ways of being, and addressing the processes and conditions for the societal production of difference.

We have to accomplish these tasks in a way that their interdependence is understood, because none can be accomplished without the others. I recognize that this is at the heart of many anthropologists’ work, and it is not necessarily their fault that one-sided or simplified understandings have been adopted. It is, however, our responsibility to continue to show how the three tasks are constitutive of an understanding of the human condition. On the one hand, we share a common human experience that is at the base of our capacity to comprehend each other and we need concepts, methodology and theory that reflects upon this sameness. On the other hand, our different ways of perceiving and conceptualizing the world are inflected by the relations of inequality in which we stand towards each other.

These premises – and, I would argue, only these premises – make possible a critical anthropological theory, a theory of relationality that addresses domination for its specific constitution of difference.

Such a critical anthropological theory thus needs to rest on the assertion of our insights into the basic commensurability of human experience. Positing such a basic commensurability means that we are the same in some respects, even if different in others. It denies complete difference, which would produce incommensurability. Claims to incommensurability, I would assert, are political projects no matter who engages in them, and whether they serve to ward off dominating others (Humphrey, 2012) or, more often, serve as a means of domination. So in the end, my claim of a basic commensurability is a political project, but one that, I think, is better substantiated by our empirical findings, and simply by our evidence that we can comprehend and understand each other. Politically, commensurability is the turn from difference to inequality: only when we consider ourselves comparable, and thus equal to others, can differences be termed inequalities, and only if there is commensurability can such inequalities be unjust. This means that, just as much as power relations are constitutive of inequality, so they are constitutive of difference, and difference cannot be fully understood outside them.

The potential for commensurability that lies in our fundamental commonality, and thus the sociality and relationality of difference, has struck me whenever I have examined globally circulating legal norms. Unlike the most ready explanation, which foregrounded cultural difference in my interdisciplinary conversation, not only the validity of a norm within a specific situation, but above all its meaning – that is: that specific interpretation of a norm that held sway in a particular situation – appeared to depend to a large degree on situational constellations within larger figurations. These determined the respective dominance, hegemony or recognition of different normative orders, and the effects of their plurality on social relations. Thus, an empirical exploration of the constitution of the relative power of different normative interpretations was best captured with Elias's concept of the 'figuration' (1978), which describes the far-reaching webs of asymmetric interdependencies that are embedded in wider and more long-standing socio-economic transformations. The concept of 'Figurations' thus puts the focus on the dynamics of transformation of (unequal) power relations. Insights into the relationality of difference led me to seek a conceptual position that would enable the diachronic and synchronic analysis of interdependence, through which social phenomena could be examined in their constituent dynamic entanglements.

The 'structured contingency' that inheres in the concept of figuration is captured by the concept of 'situation' that Luc Boltanski has advanced. Boltanski used the notion of situation to overcome the determinism of Bourdieu's concept of the habitus (Boltanski, 2010: 41). I think we can extend his attention to situations and their structured contingency further in order to overcome the pitfalls of both methodological individualism and structural determinism (see Boltanski, 2014). If we take Boltanski's notion of situation seriously, it is about micro-analyses of the contingent encounter of different logics of action in situations

structured by historical figurations. Thus, it opens up the possibility of the micro-analysis of macro-relations and of those processes that establish and transform historical figurations. It offers ‘conceptual frameworks...that could put into play causal relations grasped on different scales at the same time’ (Boltanski, 2014: 266).

Thereby, the concept of situation also opens up the potential to think about possible alternatives. Since situations are analysed in the fine-grained diachronic and synchronic interdependencies that constitute them, what was not possible and why not are questions that can be addressed. This concept of situation allows us to provide theories and concepts of current social relations, to theorize and historicize the entanglement of processes, that is, to grapple with structured contingency, which constitutes such situations. Thus, what Anna Tsing calls ‘Friction’, the contingent encounter of different, far-reaching processes of circulation, can be examined. However, the utility of the concept is not confined to ‘global’ processes connoted as part of ‘globalization’ as the reference to Tsing might suggest. It is certainly not the point to establish some juncture between a local and autonomous past and a present affected by global interdependencies. Rather, we need to re-emphasize a perspective on the present that is inherent in the anthropological project, namely, to attend to the historical and social constitution of any phenomena.

Nor is the intention to trace potentially endless chains of interdependence, the distributed agency in which any process, event or phenomenon is connected. Rather, the question to ask is how far such chains of interdependence and entanglement reach, and what particular role-specific institutions, such as law, play in cutting these chains of interdependency at very specific points, as Marilyn Strathern (2001) has shown in her analysis of intellectual property rights. Thus, by analysing institutions that determine which chains of interdependence are deemed relevant, and which are given institutional significance, we can analyse the structuration of figurations. Thereby we can also address processes and institutions that decouple chains of interdependencies. Decoupling can be the result of both autonomy and isolation, that is: the possibility of decoupling can be based on positions of domination, which make possible processes of monopolization and lead to appearances of independence, although they are made possible by a specific position within interdependent relations. On the other hand, decoupling can be based on positions of subordination in which specific interdependencies are devalued to the degree of being negated; that is exclusion.² Situations of decoupling with such diverse grounds will thus have equally diverse effects on inclusion into or exclusion from wider social relations. To address decoupling as decoupling, that is, as a relational process, rather than as given autonomy – a quality that inheres in an entity – enables us to examine the conditions of its possibility, and thus to analyse the constitution of situations that appear as given.

Thus, such institutional ‘cuts’ in the network (Strathern, 2001), i.e. chains of interdependencies, are political cuts in as much as they recognize and determine the reach of interdependence and entanglement. They are political in as much as they

structure the way we can legitimately make claims on each other (Eckert, 2016); they shape the possibilities of what connections can be thought, and which remain imperceptible (Boltanski, 2010; see also Lukes, 1974: part III).

To provide analytical tools to address the relationalities that shape our world, and to reveal how relationalities are obscured through the presumption of given (racialized, cultural, gendered, or religious) differences, is to engage in critique. Any social science has at its core a critique of what we find the world to be. Critique means exercising the faculty of observation, which is always in some sense the construction of judgement, if only in the way of selecting and ordering the relevance of criteria of observation. Several decades of debate about the anthropological project centre on the need to acknowledge that critique is inherent in every part of the anthropological endeavour. Hence anthropological theory requires making explicit the concepts, questions and criteria of critique.

Critique does not necessarily mean criticism, but criticism needs to rest on critique. One way to criticize is to ask: ‘who’s done it?’ – a bit like Agatha Christie. It seems to me we can reach a more thorough critique if we replace the question ‘who’s done it?’ with the question ‘how could this have happened (even if all those involved might have intended something else)?’,³ the question that is implied if we approach phenomena, states of affairs, through the concept of situation (see also Glick Schiller, 2012).

Why ask ‘how could this happen?’ What do we gain from such a perspective? With the question ‘how could this happen?’ we gain analytical independence from assuming intentions. ‘Sociology is not a detective story, still less a spy story, even if it sometimes tries to solve mysteries and even if it finds itself confronting the question of conspiracy’, writes Boltanski (2014: 260). Intentions may play a role, but we must ask how intentions actually come to bear on processes. We gain independence from ascribing some agency to a potent ‘world spirit’ (Hegel’s *Weltgeist*), be this ‘neoliberalism’ or any other dogma, yet see how such a ‘spirit of the age’ can be located within the practices of asymmetrically interrelated actors with unequal power taking multitudinous actions. Ideologies, Hegel’s ‘the spirit[s] of the age’, and governmentalities gain potency by legitimating specific orientations of actors’ actions and practices, by constituting alliances between differently positioned actors; by offering a common language that brings disparate projects into one fold, and thereby giving voice to some and silencing others. Through them we shape our thought and orientations. Just like intentions, fashions of legitimation and justification can have potency: they explain projects, such as humanitarianism (Fassin, 2010) or the rights discourse (Merry, 2003), and thereby orient those involved. How exactly they gain such potency can better be elucidated through the question ‘how did this happen?’: then we can examine how intentions, ideologies, fashions, diverse logics of action and diverse logics of practice interlock to produce results that are neither necessarily intended nor determined, but produced in figurations.

In some way this perspective bears resemblance to the new holisms that have been advocated for by various anthropologists, like Xiang (in this issue) or

Tatjana Thelen and Erdmute Alber (forthcoming). This is, of course, not the holism of structural functionalism, but a holism of historical processes. This new holism, to me, means asking what different forces act upon us, what material conditions and what legal and political institutions shape our existence, how these different forces and projects work together to shape what we think we are and what we want, and how these forces are transformed by us realizing them. While expertise on ‘the other’ is, as I hinted at in the beginning, what is often expected from us anthropologists by others, holism is possibly the unique feature that distinguishes us more than anything else from other social sciences, among them all versions of differentiation theory.

Not that we need to assume this difference to be absolute, since differentiation theory is also interested in the context of systems, and we, too, are interested in the auto-poetic momentum of sub-fields – or maybe we aren’t? Is our question not more about the conditions of the possibility of such momentum? Is it thus not more about the constitution of decoupling, autonomy or isolation? Is it thus not the attention to the structured entanglements of different momentums that makes us take distance to all teleological or other hierarchizations of different forms of social order – hierarchizations that are at least implicit in most differentiation theories in as much as they imply an increase in differentiation as a quasi-natural path, and de-differentiation as a sign of decline? Is not the abstention from privileging any one form of social organization founded in exactly such a holistic perspective, which examines all forms of social order and organization for their constitution through the coincidence of divergent actions oriented towards diverse projects, and in asymmetrical interdependence, that bring forth structured relations?

How can we critique and criticize then? Is not examination of structured contingency and concurrence of diverse logics of action merely descriptive in its result – a *Verlaufsgeschichte* without reflection on the selection of criteria of observation? I consider a perspective that integrates the diachronic and synchronic constitution of situations in far-reaching interdependencies of specific figurations a potent form of critique and of criticism. By overcoming the inevitability of structural determinism, and the voluntarism of methodological individualism, but examining how diverse projects are shaped and themselves shape the world they act upon, it makes possible not only tracing why things are as they are, but also how they could have been different at any point. And more: it provides the possibility to think how they could be different in the future.

Knowledge of the social determinants of thought [and difference] is indispensable to liberating thought, if only slightly, from the determinisms that weigh on it (as on all social practice) and thus to putting us in a position to project ourselves mentally outside of the world as it is given to us in order to invent, concretely, futures other than the one inscribed in the order of things. (Wacquant, 2004: 1)

This means that theory has the capacity to elucidate and articulate the possible, the alternative that remained silenced and unsayable (see Xiang, 2016). Critical theory

must assume this task. It is critical in as much as it can trace processes of silencing and make possible imagining what is not – as yet – but could be possible (Butler, 2004).

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Notes

1. I differ in the use of the term ‘sociality’ from that of Glick-Schiller et al. (2011), who hold ‘sociality’ to summarize all social relations from conflict to unity. They use the term ‘sociability’ to denote the ontological fact of having some domains of sameness. I use sociality in the sense of ‘*Vergesellschaftung*’, intending to stress the systemic societal factors that create difference, rather than simply the social processes as such.
2. ‘Self-exclusion’, too, since its terms can most often not be self-determined, is thus constituted from a subordinated position within interdependent relations.
3. According to Hegel, the question ‘how did this happen?’ is the question of tragedy: tragedy deals with the collision not between good and evil, but between one-sided positions, which all might contain good and evil. Tragedy is about the dilemmas of entangled but possibly contradictory actions, which follow their own specific logics, aims and valences, and that produce in their sum something other than any of them might have intended.

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