

# Special section: *Anthropology after Darwin*

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## Editorial

The three essays in this special section of *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale* are unusual in many respects, yet they represent a central aspect of what I believe to be the journal's intellectual mission. Twentieth-century European social anthropology has, under the influence of its predominantly British and French ancestors, concentrated on socio-cultural phenomena. If other European traditions in anthropology or ethnology maintained relationships with archaeology, folklore and literature, socio-linguistics, or biological anthropology, they were overshadowed by these dominant social anthropological traditions. The dominant European traditions themselves, while keeping up with North American cultural anthropology, rarely connected systematically with the other three of the North American 'four fields': linguistics, archaeology and biological anthropology. That is unfortunate, especially in the case of the latter. North American anthropology cannot be understood without going back on the scientific use of the biological category of 'race' that Franz Boas tried to combat by highlighting the notion of culture. Likewise, one cannot get a good sense of the history of European anthropology without attempting to understand why the history of social anthropology usually erases its historical origins in the biological inspiration that determined the work of figures like Cuvier, Prichard, Desmoulins and Darwin (see Huxley 1900 [1865]; Stocking 1973). We are still the heirs of Durkheim, Malinowski and Boas, for whom biology was, so to speak, the 'significant other' of the science of culture and society.

This heritage still makes itself felt today, when, for instance, we debate whether current 'cultural fundamentalisms' are new forms of racism or not (Stolcke 1995), or when, during the El Dorado controversy, 'scientific anthropology' – often in the guise of sociobiology or evolutionary psychology – was opposed to anthropological activism, and a large number of anthropologists discussed the propriety of taking blood samples from Venezuelan Yanomami in the context of doing ethnographic research among them. This indicates that the interface between socio-cultural anthropology and biology remains an issue when academic anthropologists are forced to face the public domain. In popular as well as in interdisciplinary academic culture, anthropologists continue to have to defend their expertise against the seemingly more 'exact' models of biological or statistical 'science'. In intradisciplinary fora, in contrast, a systematic engagement with this interface is rare. Whereas certain subdisciplines (like medical anthropology) may be forced into such engagements, the general relationship is more likely to emulate

the recent split of the Stanford anthropology department into a more ‘cultural’ and a more ‘biological’ section.

As Tim Ingold argues in his introduction to these papers, this has led to a situation in Europe where an explicit critical engagement of anthropologists with the grand narratives of science and evolution has become rare – a situation that has contributed to the loss of public credibility of social anthropology. Despite similar developments in North America, the proximity of cultural and biological anthropology in the North American academy still results in such critical engagements – helped by such explicitly ‘four-field’ institutions like the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *Current Anthropology* and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. Thus, we must thank Tim Ingold for stimulating such cross-Atlantic discussions by convening the panel on ‘Anthropology after Darwin’ at the July 2003 meetings of the Association of Social Anthropologists, and thank Jonathan Marks and Barbara King for being two excellent liaisons with the recent critical reflections on evolution, biological anthropology and socio-cultural anthropology that take place in the North American academy.<sup>1</sup> If these authors may have different views on how notions of evolution and ‘Darwinianism’ intersect with biological and social anthropology, they agree on the value of the conversation, and allow the readers of *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale* to consider how important this conversation is to them. Answers to this question will differ, but one can minimally suggest that it is worthwhile to consider to what extent undergraduate and graduate teaching in European anthropology incorporates, or should incorporate, the current state of the art of the discussion about evolution, biology and culture.

However, this is not the only level at which these papers invite social anthropologists to reconsider their engagement with biological anthropology. Recent critical discussions among anthropologists of the use of the concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘society’ (see, for example: Abu-Lughod 1991; Appadurai 1996: 14–15; Ingold 1996; Stolcke 1995) are accompanied by discussions – often inspired by Marcel Mauss – of the sociality of material artifacts (Appadurai 1986; Gell 1998; Strathern 1988) and of the physical body and its engagement with nature and landscape.<sup>2</sup> Important aspects of these theoretical developments are echoed in the papers in this special section: to borrow Barbara King’s words, they touch on fields ‘where biological and social anthropology are already in relation’. Tim Ingold and Barbara King argue that we need to rethink the notion of social relation in such a way that it can encompass and surpass dichotomies between humans and animals, and between humans as humans and humans as animals. Thus, they show that it is possible and necessary to enlarge the scope of our anthropological methodology – centred on the qualitative analyses of ethnography – to social relations with what were commonly regarded as ‘non-human’ entities. Both King and Ingold argue that this implies a ‘deep’ critique of the cultural hegemony of a statistical imagination that holds so much of contemporary ‘science’ in thrall – a hegemony that King calls the ‘checklist approach’, and that Ingold criticises as a form of statistical ‘fragmentation’ of the relational topology of organic-cum-historical development. King and Ingold show us ways in which we can expand the anthropological claim to be able to furnish a better qualitative understanding of

1 The fourth panelist, William Durham, was unfortunately not able to contribute to this special section of *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale*.

2 The literature is already too vast to reference. See Ingold, this issue; for other recent reflections on these topics in this journal, see Grasseni (2004) and Harrison (this issue).

the world – and as Ingold argues, we should not aspire to anything less – against the hegemonic yet often mindless (can we say ‘pseudo-scientific’?) abstractions of the culture of statistics (see Asad 1994). Like Tim Ingold, Jonathan Marks provides us, in his contribution, with the classifications, the language and the insights that allow for a critical engagement with what has often been regarded (by non-anthropologists) as the unquestionable ‘fact’ of evolution. Taken together, these articles give the readers of this journal an unusual but vital resource for re-positioning their discipline in relation to increasingly important public as well as academic concerns.

## References

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