What Kind of Political Anthropology?
An external insider view

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In accordance with the mission statements of International Political Anthropology, the aim of this article is to reflect, on the central purpose of this journal, on the possible meanings of its title, and on the motivations for launching a journal on “political anthropology”; in particular, why “international” political anthropology?

This piece could not possibly pretend to be an official voice, and is certainly not written in order to pre-empt other possible interpretations; yet, it is written by a member of the editorial board, an evidently very active member, so by somebody who is very much “involved” and “concerned”, even “preoccupied”. It therefore represents a personal perspective concerning the place the new journal is trying to mark out for itself, and the potential significance of this initiative.

When launching something new, especially in these saturated times, one unavoidably must start by trying to avoid misunderstandings. It is necessary to use words, and words that people easily understand; yet, every word might be a trap, full of history, which can be understood in many different ways. A new journal must offer something that was not yet available, otherwise there is no point launching it; yet, it must also respect traditions.

International Political Anthropology, as I see it, is particularly respectful of long-standing intellectual traditions. However, exactly because of this, it is important to mark out its distance from other efforts using similar arrangements of words.

First of all, and most importantly, this is not a disciplinary journal, but is positioning itself at the interstices of various social science disciplines; it is programmatically interdisciplinary, even multi-disciplinary. This interdisciplinary character is further underlined by its international nature. International, as I see it, has two implications here. Whilst the journal belongs to no particular national tradition, it is not simply a collection of national disciplinary associations. The distinctive character of this journal is thus its being both interdisciplinary and international.

Apart from “international”, the two words “political” and “anthropology” immediately identify two crucial disciplines, central for the journal and well represented in its editorial board, “Politics” and “Anthropology”. Yet, the journal is not entitled “International Journal of Politics and Anthropology”, and for a very good reason. Such a title would signal a “merely” interdisciplinary journal, at the intersection point of two disciplines only. This, however, is evidently not what this journal is about – it also extends to sociology, philosophy, and history, and possibly even further (mythology, archaeology, comparative literature, aesthetics, geography, etc.). It is concerned with some of the most basic common underlying problems, issues, or concerns of the social and human sciences.

Yet, words do matter and so it must be understood why these two words were kept in the title; in particular, why in the exact form “Political Anthropology”. First of all, why “Anthropology”? While the use of this word might create some confusion, especially from the perspective of mainstream social or cultural anthropology in the British and U.S. academic establishment, it is – for a variety of reasons – the most appropriate word to use. To start with, the journal is English speaking only, but international, so not tied to the limits of the British or North-American academic landscape. This is particularly important for the
term “anthropology”, as in Germany or France for a long time the equivalent discipline was called *Ethnologie* or *etnologie* – actually a better term for what most English-speaking anthropologists were doing in the past, (especially concerning the heavy burden of the almost prohibitive rule to spend three full years in isolated field-work); while there was, especially in Germany, an important tradition of philosophical anthropology, going back to Kant, of which the clearest representatives in the last century were Helmut Plessner and Arnold Gehlen; though Max Scheler or Eric Voegelin, and so many others, are also often classified as “philosophical anthropologists”. Even in the form Lévi-Strauss codified anthropology after WWII by considerably distorting Mauss’ central ideas – *anthropologie* in French contains a more comprehensive dimension than “anthropology” in English.2

After all, and still staying with words: “anthropology” is a Greek word, which makes it particularly difficult to assert an interpretive monopoly based on the uses of the term within the Anglo-American tradition. Even further, what matters more than Greek language is the close affinity the word helps to establish with classical Greek culture and thought, which is the source of modern culture – a connection central for the journal. The main issue here is not simply intellectual tradition, but a central concern that cannot be ignored and that lies well beyond the scope of modern disciplinary approaches which – with all due respect to the evident merits of specialization – often do not see the forest for the trees. What this journal suggests is not that specialised disciplinary research is pointless, but that we actually live in a moment when mainstream disciplinary research has reached – and even went considerably beyond – its useful or legitimate limits. There is strong evidence that it has become overspecialised, bogged down in minuscule, often terribly trivial problems. We now know more and more about less and less but ignore a set of fundamental issues that need to be posed again, as they belong to the heart of the human condition or the nature of the human being – of human Being, or of being human. Anthropologists and social scientists talk about “constructed” communities, as if the urge to belong were not a basic aspect of human nature; or about “sexuality” as a matter of choice and a driving force of identity politics, ignoring our deep-seated and highly spiritual need to pull others and of being pulled in the sense of Aristotle. In order to make the best use of the large amount of often extremely precious work that is being done in various disciplines it is therefore necessary to stop seeing the future in increasingly narrow specialisations by returning to some of these most fundamental questions. In the classical tradition such questions were posed by philosophy. They focused not on “modern” concerns such as survival, self-preservation, the search for pleasure, power, greed or lust, but rather understood the fundamental underlying problems, assumptions, issues and concerns of the social, political and human sciences in terms of the nature and the possibility of the Good life: the pursuit of harmony, beauty and truth in a decent human, social and political world.

However, if so far the current English use of the term anthropology was only considered in a negative sense, (marking the difference between a disciplinary approach and the multi-disciplinary aims of the journal), it must now be pointed out, that among the various disciplines of relevance for the journal, social or cultural anthropology must occupy a special place, in a sense which is both very general and quite specific – and closely related only to a special segment of this discipline. “Ethnology” as the discipline studying the various ways in which human beings live on the planet, forming different communities, was always considered as a useful way of increasing the narrow limitations of “Euro-centrism” – or rather “moderno-centrism”; to use the title of the classic work of Clyde Kluckhohn, as a “Mirror for Man”. Here the emphasis was usually on the wide variety of the empirical
material collected, often from an explicit perspective of “cultural relativism”. Beyond mere examples and empirical classifications, however, this journal intends to be a forum for giving meaning to the material collected. It thus suggests a return, from a novel angle, to the most fundamental problems of classical political philosophy. The best anthropologists, ethnographers and ethnologists should be considered as the philosophers of the modern world; the real philosophers of our times, just when – paraphrasing Foucault pace Foucault – philosophy (and political theory in general) has fallen into the kind of “ rationalist slumber” of modern analytical philosophy and rational choice theory. Nevertheless – and this is the second point – evidently not all modern-day anthropologists can, nor should, be considered as genuine philosophers. This category can only apply to those who took seriously the task of being “philosophical anthropologists” in the tradition of classical political philosophy, thus overcoming the taken for granted assumptions of the evolutionary materialism and rationalism of their own day. Within the narrow limits of ethnology or social anthropology this includes figures who were distant from the main disciplinary tradition, often even explicitly marginalized, or not even considered as “real” anthropologists, like Marcel Mauss (first and foremost), Arnold van Gennep, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Paul Radin, Gregory Bateson, Victor Turner, Colin Turnbull, René Girard, and of course many others.

Now we can turn to the other substantive word in the title, “Political”. Tying the argument closely to the previous paragraph, one can again evoke Marcel Mauss, who in his *Essay on Gift* explicitly considered his work as the continuation of the classical tradition of political philosophy, also sharing close affinities with the political and moral philosophies of Montesquieu, Adam Smith or de Tocqueville. In fact, this might be the main reason why the editors preferred the term “political” to “social” or to the neologism “sociological”: it was important to underline the continuity with the classical tradition of thought, instead of emphasizing on the rupture which sociology so evidently represents. The most basic sense of this point is expressed by the Aristotelian term *zoon politikon*, often translated today as man being a “social animal”, but which does not do full justice to the original expression, ignoring the political dimension. The human being is of course both social and political, but the editors gave priority to this political dimension, perhaps exactly because this is so neglected in the type of liberal-Enlightenment mentality that dominates current social theorizing, and perceptively analyzed by Reinhart Koselleck (1988) as a central aspect of the pathogenesis of modernity.

This is as far as I can go, from my position of an “external insider”, about the reasons for launching a multi-disciplinary international journal entitled “International Political Anthropology”. Beyond the title words, however, the journal includes in its scope of interest subject matters or problems of major concern to other social and human sciences, which call attention to and go to the heart of the human condition and the Good life. Such an opening up towards sociology, philosophy, history, philology, archaeology, aesthetics, mythology, amongst others, must also imply at the same time a narrowing, as otherwise it would be impossible to maintain coherence and direction. Contributions should probe into fundamental problems of the human condition, and should directly champion, or render possible, multidisciplinary cooperation. This implies that while papers should go beyond the narrow limits of mainstream disciplinary analysis, or even the simple combination of ideas from different mainstream traditions, they ought not to engage in a simple critique of these traditions.

For a variety of reasons, it does not seem to me that “critique” is, or should be, a central concern for the journal. Criticism, after all, is a very old concern, safely located at the
heart of modern disciplinary traditions, just as critical theory, in most of the social, political and human sciences, has become fully integrated within the mainstream. But also because – and here again it is necessary to return to the “pure springs” as sources, the oldest and clearest traditions – doubt, suspicion, critique, denouncing, looking for whatever is bad, ugly, questionable, or, that which shows suffering, pain, frustration, is not, after all, a nice thing to do. Bad things, of course, do happen, and they should not be ignored; they should be analyzed, with due serenity, instead of continuously shown up, in a repetitive, quasi incantatory way. After all, as the political, economic, social and cultural history of the past century has amply demonstrated, criticism and critical theory in all its varieties managed to produce one certain effect: to render things worse by magically and contagiously reproducing exactly those aspects of life it wanted to “criticize” – the best example being perhaps the way in which communism in Eastern Europe, and even more so in China, only managed to adopt and magnify the excesses of capitalism.

Something else must be tried rather than a further “radicalization of critique”. Nihilism, pace Nietzsche, should not be countered by further promoting nihilism; the arch-Marxist slogan “the worse is the better” is actually one of the worst things one could come up with. Social, political and cultural analysis should not search for and uncover whatever “bad” is going on in society, showing up triumphantly the ugly, the disfigured, and the suffering, but rather try to find whatever is still intact, resisting corrosion, and contribute to reconstructing meaningful human life, by investigating the most fundamental aspects of what it means to be human.

It would be pointless to give an exhaustive list of the themes that would fit into this kind of investigation, just as it would perhaps be counterproductive at this stage to enumerate thinkers who do and who do not belong to this line of investigation. However, concerning possible themes, and in order to invite and stimulate possible contributors, let me make a list of suggestions:

- the link between rationality and imitation, a central concern for Plato, lying at the heart of his opposition between philosophers and sophists, and much ignored in modern philosophy;
- the nature of political participation, involvement and community, including the current crisis of representation, of the nation state, even of democracy, by reconsidering these through the problem of mimesis and the Sophists;
- re-interpreting the major, iconic moments of European political history and the main figures of the Western intellectual tradition in light of anthropological concepts (e.g. considering the French revolution, including its main values, as exemplifying a liminal situation; searching for the exact rite of passage giving reality to the Kantian concept of mankind “reaching maturity”; studying the impact of wars on the rise of the modern world by considering the modern institutional structure as being produced by liminal crises);
- a revisiting of the problem of modernity, starting with the links and differences between the Renaissance and the Reformation, much neglected since the otherwise path-breaking work of Weber;
- the nature of “experience”, in all senses of the term, but beyond the “objectivist” and “empiricist” limitations, and beyond the object-subject dualism, but rather linked to related terms like “liminality”, “crisis”, “transition”, focusing on the positive, productive
aspect of such situations of crisis and transition (e.g. William James on the effects produced by religious experiences);
- the overcoming of the body-mind dualism, (and its presumed bypassing through evolutionary biology and neurophysiology), by a return to the classical formulation of the links between mind, soul and spirit, and beyond the obsolete tradition of the “critique of metaphysics”, which has no validity outside the self-critique of the tradition of German idealism, an ultimately (and profoundly) failed attempt to re-pose the fundamental problems of classical Greek philosophy (thus, in spite of its utter failure, not deprived of a certain nobility, at least until the rise of neo-Kantianism);
- studying “health” as an issue of the “whole”, following the etymology and semantics of related terms, and interpreting the proliferation of all kinds of diseases in the modern world as signs of a profound discomfort due to the losing of this wholeness (harmony, beauty);
- detailed comparisons between the central ideas of main figures in philosophical anthropology (and philosophical hermeneutics) as well as social and cultural anthropology (for e.g. Plato, de Toqueville, Tarde and Girard on rationality and mimesis; Plato on the Sophists, Foucault on the Cynics, Voegelin on Gnosticism, Weber on the Pharisees, and Radin on the Trickster; Dilthey, Voegelin, and Foucault on experience, van Gennep and Turner on liminality, Girard and Koselleck on crisis);
- the Radical Enlightenment and its effects, through its “scientific world view”, on politics, culture, and society;
- establishing points of contact between the main analysts of the rise and dynamics of modern society and the central non-mainstream and non-critical figures of the anthropological tradition (e.g. linking Elias on psycho- and sociogenesis with Bateson on schismogenesis);
- reassessing the links between literature and the social sciences, by considering literary figures as often more perceptive analysts than “rationalist” philosophers or sociologists, with novels or plays often giving a privileged access to the heart of the times (focusing on Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, or Orwell, following René Girard, Pietro Citati, Bakhtin, etc.);
- in light of recent discoveries and insights in archaeology, comparative mythology, linguistics (especially etymology), and the history of religions, revisiting the importance of pre-history for the understanding of contemporary dilemmas, beyond the evolutionary paradigm;
- a genealogy of evolutionism, from its *pudenda origo* (shameful origin) in Malthus, through the ideological uses made by Darwinism and neo-Darwinism in social and political theory, in opposition to a scientific use and discussion in biology and genetics;
- the role of elites in history, in light of recent historical studies on migration, focusing on small creative minorities instead of massive population movements and invasions;
- the significance of monasticism, and similar kinds of withdrawals from society, as related to globalisation processes – in relation to the general problem of secret societies as discussed by anthropologists, historians of religion and political scientists;
- returning to the central Weberian question of the comparative historical analysis of world civilisations, in particular focusing on the dynamics of Dark Ages and Renaissances;
the re-connection of politics and aesthetics, beyond the sad wanderings of its 20th century versions, through a study of the various meanings and manifestations of grace \textit{(charis)}, and a return to the eternal Platonic concern with the unity of the True, the Good and the Beautiful.

Let me return here, for one last time, to the fundamental concern of the journal, the reason why \textit{(beyond Comte and the Enlightenment anti-politics [Koselleck, 1988], and in spite of the current crisis of democratic representative politics which is largely due to the neglect of the imitative aspect of human nature), it evidently \textit{bad} to be entitled \textit{anthropology}, and, more exactly, \textit{political} anthropology. This is because perhaps only such a title, such a combination of words allows one to go beyond one of the worst of the many ruling neo-Kantian dichotomies of modern academic life, the strict separation between “facts” and “values” – presumably sanctioned by Max Weber. The central question of anthropology, in its broadest possible and original sense, since at least the Heraclitean \textit{ethos anthropo daimon},\textsuperscript{2} is what it means to be a \textit{human} Being. Such a question cannot even be approached within the narrow limits of a “positivistic” or “critical”, “objective” and “rational”, and most of all “value free” science. Of course, the solution cannot be the pursuit of a given ideology, based on the pretension of “solving” the problems of the age – as it is so evident that “being human” is not a problem that can be solved (unless one is a Gnostic). The undertaking should not be “normative” either; it is not trying to impose norms; quite on the contrary, it rather avoids any legal terminology whatsoever; it is not concerned with normative values, but instead with posing questions concerning the deepest and broadest concerns related to the nature of our common life, our being human, and thus cannot be restricted to the cold, distant, disinterested, value-free perspective of the \textit{outsider}.\textsuperscript{6}

The term “human being” is often understood as a single, concrete person, almost a synonym of the individual. For “political anthropologists”, it rather stands for an aspect of the world, or of “Being”, which has to do with us, humans. It does not play on the opposition between the individual (subject, self, person) and the state (society, community), but questions the very meaning of such an opposition, taking for granted the political nature of “man”, and connecting it to the deepest, inseparable element of personhood.\textsuperscript{7} “Being human” means exactly these inseparable ties: between the single, concrete person, and the similarly concrete but encompassing (political) communities, and personal/interpersonal relations. All, together forming a beautiful and harmonious whole: not as a pure, static ideal, but as a dynamic, spirited, living piece of reality.\textsuperscript{8}

Notes

\textsuperscript{1} See Foucault’s 1961 “minor thesis”, devoted to Kant’s “Anthropology”, considered by Foucault as lying at the heart of Kant’s life-work (Foucault, 1964).

\textsuperscript{2} For a discussion of the three terms in the French context, see Fournier (2006: 233-4). Mauss, in fact, in 1925 (with Lévy-Bruhl and Paul Rivet) created an “Institute for Ethnology”, not “Anthropology”, for promoting the kind of research that in today’s English speaking academic establishment is associated with the discipline of “Anthropology”.

\textsuperscript{3} In the sense of Kodály and Bartók, founders of folklore studies in music, or ethnomusicology

\textsuperscript{4} For a comprehensive study of the “Radical Enlightenment”, see Israel (2001).
It is not possible to give an unambiguous translation of this Fragment B 119; as “Man’s character is his daimon” (Kirk and Raven, 1957: 213), could mean that “Man’s conscience defines his character”; but also that “Man’s ethos (or conduct of life) becomes his conscience”.

See especially Elias (1987) and more recently Pizzorno (2007), who even argues that the rationality of any social action can only be assessed once participants are asked about their reasons; judgments formulated from a purely external, “outsider” perspective necessarily remain ideological (Pizzorno, 2007: 171-2).

Realising this is the type of education that, according to Wilhelm Hennis (1988), Max Weber wanted to pursue when launching his new journal Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik as an editor in 1903-4. Hennis, by the way, also argued that the central concerns of Max Weber were the nature of the human being (Menschentum), the question of the personality (Persönlichkeit), and the loss of this personal dimension due to the kind of homogenizing, ossifying, and mechanizing characteristic of the modern world. See in particular Weber’s famous description, at the end of the Protestant Ethic, of “mechanized petrification”, combined with “a sort of convulsive self-importance”, as possible end-products of the development of the modern world, followed by a direct quote which nobody could trace, but which explicitly alludes to Nietzsche’s “last men”: “ ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity (des Nichts) imagines that it has attained a level of civilization (Stufe des Menschentums) never before achieved’ ” (for English version, see Weber, 1995: 182; for German original, see Weber, 1988: 204; originally published in 1920).

Let me conclude by illustrating the argument using a concrete anecdote. Following my distinguished, now retired colleague, Paddy O’Carroll, I am convinced that the study of politics is inseparable from anecdotes. We can learn from a single anecdote more than from three research monographs; though, needless to say – and this must only be said because evidently some people systematically do not want to understand, were evidently taught (or rather trained) not to understand – political science cannot be reduced to anecdotes. The example is a simple news item, one of the many items that are included in the mid-section of “home news” (cronaca in Italian), to be forgotten immediately once read. A woman suffered an incident, and was on a life support system, in between life and death, for about a week. During all this time, 24 hours a day, her husband was sitting next to her, holding her hands, not giving up hope. At the end of a week, after the first short walk outside, evidently (but evidently only “evidently”) in utter despair, he goes to his wife, grabs her inert body, and shakes her thoroughly, shouting at her: “You cannot do this to yourself; you cannot do it to me”. And – surprise, surprise – “it” actually worked: after a few hours, the women opened her eyes, the next day started to speak, and within a week was out of the hospital.

The story is only a story; obviously cannot be made into a norm. “Please, shake well your wife when on a life support system” – nobody could possibly utter such nonsense. And yet, what this man did – far from acting out of utter despair or mad rage, rather doing exactly the only right thing at the right time – is simply what being human means, in its deepest (or highest) sense.

Bibliography