

Introduction

The Future of the Future in Anthropology

A reader opening this book already has expectations. You, the reader, may have prepared yourself, based on other literature that you have read, to sit down with a book about time and temporality. As you begin reading this page, you may have already anticipated how such a book will fit into a course that you are studying or research that you are planning. You may see the potential for such a book to help you with a particular problem, and you may already be speculating, based on the chapter titles, about what such a book would include or leave out.

We ask you to look up from the page. Turn your head. You may be sitting in your own home, a space of familiarity, as we are while writing. In front of us is a desk that needs to be cleaned of the remnants of another project, and a bookshelf that needs to be packed in anticipation of a move. In another room is the low hum of a washing machine spinning clothes from a recent trip and reminding us not to leave the house until the cycle has finished and the clothes have gone in the dryer. Outside the window, at something of a distance, is the buzzing and hammering of a seemingly never-ending construction project a block away. At a closer distance, not far from the window, ravens caw to each other and take us, for a flitting moment, on a flight outside the trajectory of the human.

The desk, the bookshelf, the mechanical spinning, the birdcall, and the flicker of this screen as we write are all materialities that engage and

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embed us in layered and entangled but separable temporalities. The temporality of the washing machine is not the same as that of the birdcall, which in turn is not the same as the desk that needs to be cleaned. Each engages us in temporal orientations of differing depth and urgency. Sometimes these are orientations that require us to act, while at other times – such as the never-ending construction project – they are orientations that simply enter our awareness, at least for now.

This book traces ways in which anthropology may examine such orientations. The orientations that we have chosen – anticipation, expectation, speculation, potentiality, hope, and destiny – all represent differing depths of time and different, though often related, ways in which the future may orient our present. Obviously, our list of such temporal trajectories is far from complete, but we believe it is sufficient to help orient anthropology toward futural orientations, or a way of thinking about the indeterminate and open-ended teleologies of everyday life. Teleology has gotten something of a bad rap in the social sciences ever since it was harnessed to the temporality of modernity and progress. Teleology also often carries a whiff of the eschatological. However, in consonance with a recent neo-Aristotelian turn in philosophy, we see a revived understanding of teleology as the only way to make sense of the future's role in orienting quotidian action.

This introduction, in turn, is intended to orient you, the reader, toward our understanding of the future's role in the study of society and culture. After all, not all of the orientations that we experience as we sit writing or reading help us to understand the temporalities of collectives. The hum of the washing machine constraining me from leaving the house is not the same as a whole neighborhood speculating together about when they will get relief from the noisy, never-ending construction project. Our focus in this book is on what the former may tell us about the latter, or what philosophical conjecture about the role of the future in shaping temporality may tell us about the ways that we act together in our orientations toward the future.

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In order to do this, we first trace a brief history of the future in anthropology. Our main question in this introduction is why the study of the future in the discipline has not achieved the centrality or complexity of studies of the past, and why that is changing today. We show how this shortchanging of the future reveals to us the temporality of anthropology, as it has changed over the course of the twentieth century. If anthropology's temporality is changing today, how is the discipline being reoriented? We then discuss futural orientations as a theoretical tool to help anthropology move beyond an overweening emphasis on the past. In particular, we discuss how teleologies may be indeterminate and open-ended, and how an approach to timespace rooted in the materialities of everyday life may help us to understand the role of the future in collectivities.

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Historically, as they say, the future has gotten short shrift in anthropology. In her landmark 1992 essay on the anthropology of time, Nancy Munn observed that in the discipline, "the future tends to be a displaced temporal topic, absent from its homeland in the past-present-future relation" (p. 116). She speculates that the reason for this is anthropology's focus on "long-term historical-mythic time," which lends itself to a concentration on the past. Congruently, Joel Robbins (2007) has argued that anthropology is fundamentally concerned with the continuity of tradition and culture and cannot take account of the sorts of ruptured pasts and messianic futures represented, say, by the Protestant faith as reflected in postcolonial regions. What Munn and Robbins share is a conviction that the absence of an anthropology of the future reveals to us certain central tenets of the discipline.

Indeed, the future has been a literal dead-end for the discipline. In contrast to the sociological emphasis on modernity, progress, and the new social forms wrought by it, early anthropologists understood

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their subject as tradition or custom and their task as documentation, salvage, and rescue. Despite the emphasis of a Durkheimian-inspired sociology on defining the social structure of modernity and the modern, the early sociological encounter with time primarily broke down into a dualist periodicity (“the premodern” and “the modern”) and interrogation of modernity’s – as opposed to premodernity’s – temporality. As Ron Eyerman (1991: 37–38) notes, modernity in the work of sociology’s “founding fathers,” Marx, Weber, and Durkheim,

referred to a world constructed anew through the active and conscious intervention of actors and the new sense of self that such active intervention and responsibility entailed. In modern society the world is experienced as a human construction, an experience that gives rise both to an exhilarating sense of freedom and possibility and to a basic anxiety about the openness of the future.

This openness to the future, moreover, was related to the way in which time is “emptied” in modernity, based no longer on seasons and rituals but instead on clocks and calendars (esp. Giddens 1990). What is notable for our purposes is that the emphasis on progress as definitional of modernity, and of anxiety regarding it, did not go along with a concomitant interest in the future as a dimension of temporality.¹

In the USA and UK, anthropology emerged from its evolutionary roots with either a synchronic interest in the functional or a historical interest in the particular. In US anthropology, Boas and his students – who, from the perspective of the UK, appeared unnecessarily concerned with historical ephemera – saw the pursuit of a historical particularism as the key to breaking apart social evolutionism, or the ranking of human groups on an evolutionary scale. “First of all,” remarked Boas in a 1920 article, “the whole problem of cultural history appears to us as a historical problem. In order to understand history it is necessary to

¹ The sociological literature on utopia may count as an important exception to this, although we should note that, following Karl Mannheim, there has been a tendency in sociological theory to interrogate utopian thinking as part of the historical trajectory of ideologies.

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know not only how things are, but how they have come to be" (Boas 1920: 314). In contrast not only to the evolutionists but also to the synchronism of the functionalists and structural functionalists, Boas notes that while the influence of society on the individual is certainly important, it has to be complemented by study of the ways in which individuals may influence society and produce social change. He remarks that this problem:

is also beginning to attract the attention of students who are no longer satisfied with the systematic enumeration of standardized beliefs and customs of a tribe, but who begin to be interested in the question of the way in which the individual reacts to his whole social environment, and to the differences of opinion and of mode of action that occur in primitive society and which are the causes of far-reaching changes.

In short then, the method which we try to develop is based on a study of the dynamic changes in society that may be observed at the present time. (ibid., 316)

In staking his ground against both the evolutionists and the functionalists, then, Boas describes the distinctive territory of "American scholars" as being "primarily interested in the dynamic phenomena of cultural change" (ibid., 314) and the particulars of cultural history.

Only two years later, Bronislaw Malinowski would articulate the rules of method that would become a guide not only for his own students in the UK, but for other students elsewhere who recognized in his description of the heroic ethnographer a way of methodologically cataloguing what fieldworkers in the USA, at least, were already beginning to accomplish: "The Ethnographer has in the field . . . the duty before him of drawing up all the rules and regularities of tribal life; all that is permanent and fixed; of giving an anatomy of their culture, of depicting the constitution of their society" (1922: 9).

Malinowski observes that, unlike in "our society," most of the rules of social institutions in the societies anthropologists study are not written down and are not recorded by the society's "intelligent members, its

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historians, and its archives and documents.” In such societies, he remarks, “There is no written or explicitly expressed code of laws, and their whole tribal tradition, the whole structure of their society, are embodied in the most elusive of all materials; the human being.” He explains the method that he has discovered to overcome this problem: “This expedient for an Ethnographer consists in collecting concrete data of evidence, and drawing the general inferences for himself” (ibid.).

We see, then, the emergence of two temporalized approaches to society, usually described in anthropology textbooks as diachronic and synchronic: on the one hand, Boas’s insistence on examining “the dynamic changes in society that may be observed at the present time,” and on the other hand, Malinowski’s description of the anthropologist’s task as recording the rules of its institutions.² While both are focused on the artifacts of the past in the present, Malinowski stresses the regularities that create social harmony and Boas the irregularities that produce social change.

This focus on the past in the present and the mythical-historical time of custom and tradition has meant that, when anthropology has addressed something that we might be able to call temporality, “futurity is poorly tended as a specifically temporal problem” (Munn 1992: 115). Indeed, anthropology has had a difficult time overcoming its rootedness in the tradition/modernity dichotomy that has founded its distinction from sociology. Although today few anthropologists would claim to be researching “tradition” except as a cultural construct, we find the lingering effects of that dichotomy in, for example, what Carol Greenhouse (1996) has argued is a naturalization of European clock time within the discipline. As Munn also noted, much anthropological thinking about time has centered on other peoples’ time-reckoning or other temporalities – a way, we might add, of ontologizing difference, where what

² Although Malinowski would, of course, later become much more concerned with social change, he remained very much a presentist insofar as he preferred his “tradition live and active,” in contrast to those “who prefer their past dead and buried” (1946: 6).

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remains of concern is to document how time can be reckoned, felt, and understood in ways that are different from “our own.” As Kevin Birth remarks, “In thinking about the human understanding of time through the human past and across cultural differences, we have adopted a unique and artifactually mediated set of ideas as the ideal type against which all other ideas are understood and evaluated” (2012: 169). In the background, argues Birth, is a uniform, homogeneous conception of (modern) time against which other, “traditional” times are measured.

Our concern in this book is not with a metaphysics of time, as important as this may be to the past-present-future relationship. Instead, we are interested in how the discipline of anthropology has periodically and sporadically concerned itself with time and temporality while almost always shortchanging the future. We see this not only in the early synchronic emphasis on documentation and diachronic attempts to historicize the present, but also in more recent work that claims to address time and temporality while focusing almost entirely on the past-present relationship.

Over the past three decades, social anthropologists have developed a robust literature that studies history, historicity, memory, nostalgia, and the past, particularly in relation to the state and social change. Although these themes were not new for anthropology, this literature acquired momentum with the rise of nationalism studies in the 1980s and a renewed focus on collective memory, national histories, and post-socialist nostalgia. While this produced an interest in the “homogeneous time” of the nation (Anderson 1983) and in the ways that national pasts are created or nations “remember” (e.g., Connerton 1989; Gillis 1994; Nora 1989; and the classic Halbwachs 1992), there was surprisingly little interest in national futures, despite the obvious fact that founding a new state is future-oriented, however much it may be justified by the past. Hence, while many of these studies claimed to focus on time and temporality, they rarely addressed the relationship between collective pasts and their anticipated futures. Temporality was truncated at the

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relation between past and present, where the future often represented an unknown against which persons struggling to maintain stability clung to particular histories.

The 1990s saw the publication of two important works that attempted to unravel anthropology's engagement with temporality and simultaneous hesitation fully to engage with the philosophy of time. Alfred Gell's *The Anthropology of Time: Cultural Construction of Temporal Maps and Images* (1992) and Carol Greenhouse's *A Moment's Notice: Time Politics across Cultures* (1996) both begin with assertions of the inadequate ways in which anthropology has dealt with time as an idea, as opposed to time as a social construct. For Gell, the proper scope of anthropological inquiry is a Husserlian-inspired interrogation of internal time-consciousness, or temporal cognition:

In general terms, temporal cognition can therefore be conceptualized as a triangular relationship between perception (input), memory (schema, recall), and anticipation (foresight, projection). Perception appertains to the present, memory to the past, anticipation to the future. The basic cycle runs from perception (present) to memory (past) to anticipation (future), and so on, in an endless round. It is the continuous activity which we ourselves engage in, generating images, matching them with perceptual input and locating them at coordinates on our internalized maps of the world, which persuades us that future, present, and past are rushing by with an uncontrollable dynamism of their own.

(Gell 1992: 237)

For Gell, then, as for Husserl, the present is primary in the temporal triangle, because it is in the present that we imagine the future and map the past.

Greenhouse, in turn, makes a subtle argument about the embeddedness of time in social practice. Time is, for her, "what makes things happen, and what makes acts relevant in relation to social experience, however conceived" (1996: 1). As a result,

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Time, whatever its “shape,” calls forth loyalties of various kinds: to God, land, descent group, king, nation, employer, one's children, and so on. Concepts of time might be dominated by one “shape” or another (e.g., a circle, line, or pendulum motion) or by no shape at all . . . but all concepts of time are flexible, permeable, and capable of proliferation.

(1989: 1632–1633)

In Chapter 1, we will develop a conception of timespace that, as the reader will see, has resonance with Greenhouse's argument, particularly its foundation in practice. It is noteworthy, however, that despite – or perhaps because of – her critique of linear time as anthropology's de facto point of reference, Greenhouse does not fully address temporality – our relationship to time – or the future as part of Gell's temporal triangle.

The future emerged as a developing field for anthropology in the 2000s, when the “war on terror” and global financial crisis and its aftershocks left many people around the world unable to anticipate the following day. Combined with growing literatures on risk and finance, as well as climate change and alternative energies, it became clear that any return of the past was directly related to the uncertain future. Moreover, the past itself seemed foreshortened by social media, which effectively telescoped the immediate future as an anticipated present. Probability, anticipation, and expectation all acquired new subjects and methods as anthropologists began to examine the frenzy of trading floors and the future of the anthropocene.

Anthropological interest in the future has rapidly expanded since the turn of the millennium, with the future being encountered in the realm of macroeconomics and finance (Guyer 2007; Ouroussoff 2010); in processes of modernity and globalization (Appadurai 2013; S. G. Collins 2008; Ssorin-Chaikov 2006, 2017); urban and state planning (Abram 2014, 2017); biotechnology (Fortun 2009); in considering the Anthropocene (Zee 2017); and through theories of temporal succession and duration (Crapanzano 2003; Hodges 2008, 2014; Knight 2012, 2015a;

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Moroşanu and Ringel 2016; Nielsen 2011). Further interventions maintain focus on the past-present relationship, citing the ethical weight of anthropology's unfinished project of reflecting on its colonial past (Pels 2015) and need for continued engagement with the discipline of history (Baca *et al.* 2009; Palmié and Stewart 2016; Shryock and Smail 2011). While we have built on some of these works in the development of this book's argument, we have pushed against others in our own conceptualizations of what is essential for a dynamic anthropology of the future.

One area in which anthropology has long shown an interest is in the occult or predictive elements of time-management, and this interest acquired new direction as more recent ethnographic accounts have focused on, for instance, prediction (Malaby 2003; Puri 2015), divination (Stein Frankle and Stein 2005), and dreaming (Edgar and Henig 2010; Stewart 2012). During eras of dramatic social change on the Greek island of Naxos, Charles Stewart shows how dreaming – prophetic, apocalyptic, rational historicist – is a means to predict the future. In a Heideggerian-inspired approach to multitemporality, Stewart demonstrates that dreams violate the dictates of historicism, bringing past, present, and future into coexistence (2012: 10–11). For Naxiots, dreams work through the constraints of village futurity by harnessing histories to activate the future and make life in the present tolerable. Like us, Stewart focuses on collective experiences of temporality, placing individual imaginative processes within society and in relation to ongoing historical processes (2012: 210).

Yet, in a theme that has often repeated itself throughout the ethnographic literature, Stewart maintains that while imaginary temporal excursions are vital to uncovering new possibilities for being, the future is faced using knowledge of the past. Although he notes that his study could be reoriented toward futurity, he instead builds on earlier work on historicity (Hirsch and Stewart 2005) to keep his focus on “the point where, in addressing the past, temporalizing tips over into historicization” (Stewart 2012: 212). A similar point could be made for numerous