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1 Introduction

Freedom, Creativity, and Decision in Recovering the Human Subject

Barbara Bodenhorn, Martin Holbraad, and James Laidlaw

Introduction

If the death of the subject was one of the headline stories of twentieth-century social theory, theoretical imaginaries in the beginning of the twenty-first have been preoccupied in several quarters with what might come after that demise. As the 'anthropocentrism' of the so-called Western modernity has come to be held responsible (more even than its rationalism, individualism, and other longer-derided infirmities) for sundry political, economic, social, and ecological ills, the search for new ways of thinking about what human beings are, and how to conceptualize them in relation to each other and to other animate and inanimate constituents of the world at large, is being pursued with a sense of urgency. One of the diacritics of this 'post-human moment' has been a marked shift in vocabulary. Talk that dignifies human subjects with attributes that distinguish them from other beings – attributes such as reason, intentionality, freedom, or consciousness – is in many quarters being displaced by a theoretical language that heralds a flatter, more diffuse analytical universe of discourses, networks, assemblages, flows, becomings, and so on. Placing humans on an equal analytical footing with non-humans of various kinds, conceptually meshing them with language, institutions, materials, artefacts, organisms, and affects, these approaches have tended to treat humans, seen as individual subjects, as at most derivative effects of such more-encompassing relational configurations and the dynamic processes that animate them, and at worst as uniquely destructive 'parasites' on those otherwise healthy configurations and processes. The corollary has been either to downplay altogether such attributes as reason, agency, autonomy, or freedom, or to deny the traditional idea that these qualities are quintessentially (if not necessarily exclusively) human, and to re-imagine them in such a way as to render them fit for non-human (viz. post-human) purpose. We now have such incongruous combinations as material agency, organic creativity, parliaments of things, and free assemblage (e.g. Bennett

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2010; Braidotti 2013; Bryant 2011; Coole & Frost 2010; DeLanda 2006; Haraway 2008; Harman 2009, 2011; Ingold 2011; Kohn 2013; Knappett & Malafouris 2008; Latour 1993, 2005; Massumi 2002, 2014; Ong & Collier 2004).

While a good deal of energy in contemporary social theory may be owed to the relish with which such 'post-human' alternatives are being promoted,[1] there are also many who wish to resist what they see as a heedless intellectual cheerleading for damaging and dehumanising trends in the contemporary world, and to call upon older well-established paradigms to reassert the peculiar dignity of the human; these self-consciously rear-guard actions being carried out in the name of quite varied so-called humanisms, from the Marxist (Gregory 2015) to the Thomist (MacIntyre 1981) and much in between (Mattingly 2012). To be sure, those inclined to resist the hype that these contemporary debates generate about themselves will see here an iteration of a more long-standing tussle in social theory between, broadly, a Durkheimian tendency to see human subjects as effects of logically prior supra-human structures, processes, and dynamics (e.g. Durkheim 1938 [1895]), and, equally broadly, a Weberian methodological individualism, which would rather take human actions, intentions, and desires as an indispensable starting point for understanding social and cultural phenomena (e.g. Weber 1950 [1903–1917]). Still, if the contemporary polemics tend to transfigure this divergence in classical social theory as a quasi-mythological binary (post-humanism *versus* humanism), they serve by the same token to crystallize a third option, which the present collection of essays sets out to pursue. In a somewhat experimental spirit, we ask whether it might be possible to reformulate a conception of human subjectivity as a distinctive phenomenon at least in part *using* the conceptual repertoire developed in the post-structuralist and current

[1] While the literature on post-humanism now reaches across disciplinary divides within the social sciences and humanities, it may be fair to say that Science and Technology Studies have provided its prime inspiration (e.g. Haraway 1992; Pepperell 1993; Graham 2002; Gane 2003; Braidotti 2006; Hayles 2008; Tsing 2013, 2015). As one of the characteristics of this literature, the focus on hybridity may seem to run contrary to the central question of the present volume, namely how anthropology might re-engage with the concept – or indeed the lived experience – of the individual subject. Certainly, much of the work emerging from Latourian Actor Network Theory – or Deleuze-inflected work on flows and assemblages – does suggest an approach in which 'the individual' loses its contours. Nevertheless, we note that for Braidotti (2006) as well as Haraway (1992), ontological shifts brought about by technological developments do not necessarily obviate the need to recognize human beings as political and ethical subjects. In this sense, they resonate to some extent with Humphrey's call to recognize the extent to which anthropologists' interlocutors experience themselves as individual subjects – the question being how such experiences may be conceived anthropologically in their full ethnographic variety. It is on that note of potential connection with the STS-inspired literature on post-humanism, rather than direct confrontation, that these questions are pursued in the present volume.

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post-humanist turn. Indeed, what aspects of humanism – understood broadly as an investment in human beings as a distinctive and in some sense *sui generis* object of study – might be reconstructed out of post-humanist conceptual materials? And what role might the way we think of freedom, decision, creativity, individuality, subjectivity, or indeed humanity play in such a reconceptualization?

In addressing such questions from a distinctively anthropological perspective, the essays that follow have a common point of reference in the work of Caroline Humphrey, whose landmark article, 'Reassembling Individual Subjects: Events and Decisions in Troubled Times' (hereafter 'Reassembling Individual Subjects'), originally published in 2008 and reprinted here, sets out the agenda for a contemporary anthropology of what she calls 'individual subjects'.

Humphrey's article is an appropriate starting point for this exercise because – like the other contributors to this volume – she has never been an uncritical exponent of a post-humanist perspective. Over a long career involving ethnographic research in Soviet and post-socialist Russia and Mongolia, and also in Nepal, India, and the Inner Mongolian region of China, Humphrey has been an influential contributor to a range of debates right across the discipline of anthropology and beyond: in economic anthropology (Humphrey 1984; Humphrey & Hugh-Jones 1992), the anthropology of politics (Humphrey 2002a, 2004; Humphrey & Huralbaatar 2005), on ritual and religion (Carrithers & Humphrey 1991; Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994), and on kinship and gender (Humphrey 1978, 1993, 2014). She has written on topics as diverse as architecture and urbanism (Alexander, Buchli, & Humphrey 2007; Humphrey & Skvirskaja 2012), nomadism (Humphrey & Sneath 1996, 1999), shamanism (Thomas & Humphrey 1994; Humphrey 1996), post-socialist transformations (Humphrey 1998, 2002b), and morality and ethics (1997, 2007). These varied writings display a theoretical eclecticism and responsiveness to new ideas that is characteristic of the discipline as a whole (at its best, or so we would argue). Humphrey approaches post-humanist concepts and arguments with the characteristic anthropologist's question: can these ideas help me to understand the forms of life I encounter ethnographically? Structuralist and post-structuralist deconstructions of the human subject – discourses which Humphrey had engaged throughout her career – had already made dealing with the singularity of human individuals, as encountered in ethnographic fieldwork, somewhat problematic. Post-humanism apparently compounds the problem. But Humphrey makes the bold move of suggesting that a positive account might be put together, from these apparently unpropitious conceptual resources, of how singular subjects both come into existence at all, and of how they come to have the historical significance they do.

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If this volume has, as one of its purposes, to acknowledge Humphrey's remarkable intellectual contribution, it does so in a singular and, we think, appropriately characteristic way. Eschewing the career-survey approach of a typical *festschrift*, we instead take as our reference point one in-many-ways unrepresentative essay, which we think is nevertheless typical in two important respects: for its breadth of vision, in identifying a concern that is of relevance right across the human sciences, and in drawing on intellectual resources equally broadly in addressing it; and for the way in which the *test* Humphrey sets for those ideas is resolutely that of ethnographic illumination. Indeed, 'Reassembling Individual Subjects' was written as a direct response to challenges encountered in Humphrey's historical ethnography of a Buddhist monastery in Inner Mongolia (Humphrey & Huralbaatar 2014), in particular the challenge of making sense of the manifest importance in the shaping of that particular social milieu of known individuals with distinctive characters making singular decisions.

Humphrey begins her paper by conceding that following now classic post-structuralist deconstructions, 'it is no longer possible to assume the simple presence of "the individual subject"' (2008a: 358). However, instead of merely allowing these theoretical developments to 'divert attention from the subject, downgrade it to a shifting subsidiary or dismiss it altogether as an effect of a concatenation of other elements', for Humphrey the challenge for anthropology must be to articulate ways of holding on to the 'singularity, or the originality of . . . particular person[s] as . . . actor[s] in a given cultural situation and specific historical circumstances' (2008a: 358). In particular, 'it is necessary to think about how a singular human being might put him or herself together as a distinctive subject by adding to, or subtracting from, the possibilities given by culture as it has been up to that point, through the very process of taking action' (2008a: 358).

Humphrey provides a number of reasons for holding on to some (suitably reconstructed) conception of individual human subjects in the wake of post-structuralist and post-human critique. These include a general dissatisfaction with the 'processual-relational haze' in which contemporary social theory so often seems to be mired, along with, as she puts it, the analytical tendency to 'sameness' (2008a: 358) that it produces – all-embracing networks of relations, omnipotent magmas of processual transformation, and so on. But the move is particularly important for anthropologists, she suggests, and this for two related reasons. On the one hand, along with historians, anthropologists cannot afford to operate with analytical frameworks that preclude a fully fledged account of people as singular personalities, since the contingency of the materials they deal with requires them to do more than just analyse the systemic properties of social, cultural, and historical structures, in order to provide also accounts of the specific events and states of affairs that they

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encounter on the ground. 'What kind of account could be given of the Russian Revolution, for example, without Lenin?' she asks (2008a: 357). Re-theorising – or, as the title of the paper would have it, reassembling – a notion of the individual subject, then, is necessary in order to account for rupture, innovation, improvisation, or other manners in which people break with their past through their actions – revolution being only the most emblematic instance of this. In this way Humphrey's argument responds directly to Joel Robbins' influential call (2007) for anthropologists to counteract their tendency towards 'continuity thinking' by providing a systematic analytical account for the possibility of singular events, as well as singular persons.

On the other hand, Humphrey suggests, anthropologists also owe it to their informants to concern themselves with individual subjects as singular beings – not merely as persons, as it were, but also as *personalities*. The people we study, after all, 'do speak constantly of singular subjects and their deeds. They talk of the consequences of someone's, a named person's, actions' (2008a: 358). In this sense, reinstating individual subjects as a serious analytical possibility for anthropology may be a major – indeed necessary – ingredient in anthropologists' long-standing concern with the ethics of their relationships with their informants (Descola 2016). It would appear that a prime source of the ethical asymmetry of these relationships lies in the tendency of anthropologists to pitch their accounts over the heads of the people they study. 'Over their heads', in this instance, refers to the tendency of anthropologists to treat the contingencies of who said or did what, when, how, why, to whom, etc., as ethnographic ciphers for larger structural, relational, or processual patterns – culture, society, politics – that are conceived ultimately as the rightful object of anthropological investigation and theorisation. Of course, there is a long history of anthropologists recording at length their friendships with individual interlocutors, and in some cases, for these anthropologists, giving due regard to the humanity of those individuals eclipses or even prohibits the classic anthropological challenges of giving systematic accounts of social-structural or cultural regularity and difference (e.g. Crapanzano 1980, Biehl 2005, Jackson 2013). But this anti-theoretical response is not the one Humphrey adopts. By helping to render individual subjects as part, precisely, of the rightful object of anthropological inquiry, then, Humphrey here strengthens the case for an academic discipline with serious theoretical and explanatory, and not merely descriptive and edificatory, ambitions.

The essays assembled in this volume respond explicitly to Humphrey's call to reassemble individual subjects, critically exploring the consequences of such a move with reference to an array of ethnographic encounters with the contingencies of people and events. In the rest of this introduction we shall discuss these essays with reference to what we take to be three prime dimensions of the concept of the human to which Humphrey's re-assembling gives

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rise: first, decision-events; second, freedom; and third, creativity. Before doing so, however, we begin by providing a brief account of Humphrey's own theorisation of individual subjects, for which she draws tactically on Alain Badiou's theory of the constitution of subjects in relation to events.

Humphrey on Individuals and Decision-Events

The target of Humphrey's essay is what she calls the 'vague anthropological consensus' against any notion of the individual human subject. She notes that the philosophical authorities routinely invoked as having effected the 'death of the subject' are actually a diverse collection with by no means coincident views, and that many among them, in addition to attacking certain conceptions of the subject, conveniently (perhaps too conveniently?) labelled 'Cartesian', also made what she calls 'more positive suggestions' for how human subjects might be understood. These suggestions, which Humphrey refers to as Subject Two (cf. Paras 2006), include proposals by Foucault, Levinas, Derrida, and Deleuze, but she chooses to take as her starting point on this occasion some recent writings of Alain Badiou. Taken together, these Subject Two proposals are a diverse set of ideas, not all mutually compatible. Humphrey engages with these lively philosophical debates to challenge what she finds to be an over simplified anthropological dismissal of 'the individual' as an ethnocentric, purely 'Western' concern. And yet, Humphrey insists, anthropologists are in a good position to know that this isn't true: the people they work with all over the world do speak of singular individuals with singular personalities, and they understand what happens around them as decisively affected by what specific individuals are like and what they choose to do. If the ways people conceive of those individuals are complex and various, and if they are not 'Cartesian', this only makes the challenge of understanding them more interesting and more inescapably central to anthropology. Anthropologists (good ones, at any rate) have found they cannot help but *describe* singular individuals in their ethnographies, so to deny their existence conceptually is to duck an imperative theoretical challenge.

The immediate interpretive task that prompts Humphrey to these wider theoretical reflections is that of how to understand the dramatic changes – and the individuals most directly involved in effecting those changes – that occurred in the life of a Buddhist monastery in Inner Mongolia during the last four centuries (Humphrey & Hurelbaatar 2014). On two occasions in particular, a very few individuals made decisions that irreversibly altered the life conditions and choices available to all those who came after them. They created new conditions of possibility, new truths and values for others to live by, and therefore new kinds of persons one might aspire to be. The argument Humphrey develops in 'Reassembling Individual Subjects' began, she tells

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us, from the intuition that Badiou's notion of 'the Event' might help to make sense of these kinds of radical changes.

However, in fairly short order Humphrey also distances herself from several of Badiou's ideas: both from specific political and historical judgements (she insists that Chairman Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, in Inner Mongolia at any rate, created no new truths or possibilities) and from fundamental aspects of his conceptualization of the Event. Badiou's binary before-after conception provides in itself no basis, Humphrey argues, for understanding the individual who may not yet be a subject, in Badiou's demanding sense, but has the potential to become so, including a singular personality and the capacity to make everyday decisions. It is accordingly in her understanding of everyday decisions that Humphrey departs perhaps most decisively from Badiou, because she insists that these too can themselves be events, hence 'decision-events'.

In developing her idea of a decision-event, Humphrey confronts head-on one central anti-humanist theme that has had a pervasive influence in anthropology in recent decades: the question of whether human action can ever be adequately explained without reference to individuals' intentional states. As Humphrey notes, Latour's notion of the 'multiple individual' (Latour 2005) and from within anthropology Strathern's (1988, 1995, 2005) Melanesian adaptation of the South-Asian 'dividual' (Dumont 1980 [1966]; Marriott 1976), have both been taken as authority for the idea that much that we might assume to be going on 'inside' people is in fact caused externally, and therefore their conduct may be explained without reference to intentionality. It is further sometimes claimed that in certain non-Western cultures people understand and explain both their own and each other's actions without recourse to mental states. (For recent debate on this question, see Robbins & Rumsey 2008 and Astuti 2012.) By contrast with this whole line of thought, several of Humphrey's sustained efforts in both theory and ethnography have been directed towards the careful delineation of human intentionality, its subtleties, variations, and modifications. The theory of ritual developed in several publications (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994, 2007; Laidlaw & Humphrey 2006) rests on the assertion that ritualization consists precisely of a subtle modification to the intrinsic intentionality of human action. In Humphrey's work on both shamanism (1996) and political subjectivities (2002a, 2008b, 2009, 2012; Humphrey & Hularbaatar 2005), questions of intentional states have been ever-present. Her influential contribution to the anthropology of ethics and morality (e.g. 1997, discussed further in this volume by Robbins) emphasized the importance of individual character, and the exercise of imagination and intentional choice, as against systems of normative rules. In 'Reassembling Individual Subjects', accordingly, Humphrey comes down decisively against the idea that the human agent can be adequately described without reference to intention. It is the individual

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human subject, as the locus of intention, that anchors the continuity Humphrey sees between everyday decision-making and the more decisive Events that create new truths and possibilities for others as well as themselves.

The next step Humphrey takes away from the 'vague anthropological consensus', and from Badiou, is to assert that there are good reasons why the subject that is 'put together' (albeit in historically and culturally variable contexts) does tend overwhelmingly to coincide with the human individual. This claim does not rest on a philosophically humanist postulate about the unique transcendental value of the human, or any claim of a similar kind. Reflecting an intellectual eclecticism that has characterized her whole career, Humphrey appeals here both to works in analytic philosophy and to empirical research in the psychology of reasoning and emotion. It is not, therefore, an absolute claim that she makes. She does not rule out that entities other than human individuals are constituted as subjects. But the way the world we live in happens to be, some things work better than others as centres of intentionality of decision-making. In very many circumstances human individuals work exceptionally well. For these reasons, argues Humphrey, even across all the highly variable historical contexts in which humans have lived, most decision-making subjects are not non-humans, or parts of humans, or combinations of humans and something else, but individual, intentional, human beings.

This leads to the final analytical move in Humphrey's argument. People have different perspectives on the world as a result of the different contexts and relations in which they find themselves; they are, to some degree, constituted by and in these relations. In a close engagement with the influential writings of Marilyn Strathern (e.g. 1988, 1995, 2005), in which this starting point is used to develop a heuristic contrast between 'Euro-American' individuals and 'Melanesian' dividuals, Humphrey argues that, in the absence of evidence yet to be produced to the contrary, it must be a mistake to suppose that any humans lack the ability to abstract from the perspectives they have as a result of being in particular contexts and relations, to compare the different perspectives they themselves have in different contexts, and to imagine others. She therefore wants to resist the widespread practice in social theory of speaking of each perspectival standpoint that a person adopts or is placed in as a 'subject', such that this is synonymous with 'subject position', and to reserve the term 'subject' instead for the entity – the centre of reflection, intentionality, and decision – that does the switching between them. The decision-events through which subjects are constituted are, Humphrey insists, 'integrating': succeeding perspectives do not erase entirely those that came before. Here Humphrey draws again one last time on Badiou. Badiou (2001) claims that because the antecedent self perseveres in some respects through the change effected by an Event, the post-Event subject must be a 'multiple singularity'. Because

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Humphrey has radically expanded the range of processes and happenings that we are to regard as subject-constituting 'events', beyond those Badiou himself designates, this claim emerges as of much broader and more profound significance than it had in his own account. In Humphrey's terms, these points characterize not only the subjects of dramatic before-and-after Pauline conversions but all human subjects everywhere. Thus the singular individual subjects Humphrey sees as constituted in everyday decisions are always internally complex and capable of radical departures, leaps in the dark, and 'plumping for' new and hitherto unimagined possibilities.

Qualifying Decision-Events

Humphrey's argument on the constitution of individual subjects through decision-events can be seen as a thoroughgoing attempt to render anthropologically workable – and ethnographically tractable – Badiou's otherwise somewhat grandiose analysis of the power of momentous events to bring about the subjects who pin their 'fidelity' upon them. Decision-events, one might say, channel the power of Badiou's argument from the grand 'Events' of 'History' in which he is (ideologically as well as philosophically) invested, towards the kinds of events that come closer to the anthropological feel for the minutiae of everyday life. In Badiou's normative universe, only the select few who pledge themselves to such rare Events as revolutions and divine revelations are able properly to attain the status of subjects. In Humphrey's treatment, by contrast, this possibility is opened up and, if you like, democratized: when circumstances call for it, *anyone* can take the plunge and make the kind of decision that crystalizes them as an individual subject in a particular way. Furthermore, while they must involve 'a fissure, a void, a space of the unknown' (2008a: 371), for Humphrey such decision-events nevertheless take place from within and in relation to, rather than beyond and despite, the socio-cultural circumstances in which people must contingently find themselves.

The chapters assembled in this volume explore and critically test the anthropological traction of Humphrey's argument. For the purposes of this introduction, and recognizing the degree of artificiality that the exercise inevitably involves, we have divided the chapters into three groups. The first group (Part I) comprises contributions by Das, Højer, and Halemba, which attempt in different ways, and in a critical spirit, to hone Humphrey's anthropological translation of Badiouian Events. Inspired by Humphrey's argument for bringing the notion of individual subjects back into the fray of anthropological analysis, all three of these chapters add further anthropological dimensions to the analysis.

Das provides a sustained and detailed critical engagement with Humphrey's model, in particular in relation to its debt to Badiou. For Das if the argument's

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anthropological purchase requires strengthening, it is because Humphrey's attempt to qualify Badiou's philosophy of the Event does not go far enough. True, decision-events constitute subjects in relation to the particular socio-cultural options available to them at the time of decision, and Das cites approvingly Humphrey's comparison of the 'leaps of faith' that such decisions involve with the role of chance in Mongolian divination, as opposed to the irremediably Christian twinning of rupture with fidelity on which Badiou's argument about Events is premised. The problem for Das, however, is that Humphrey does not go far enough in repudiating what Das sees as Badiou's heroic faith in the momentous, and his corollary disdain for the ordinary. In particular, Humphrey's analysis continues to endorse a version of this opposition in the form of the driving distinction between decision-events and the situations in which they are made. Too much in line with Badiou, for Das, Humphrey continues to see the moment of subjectivation as one in which people rise 'above' the ordinary circumstances in which they find themselves and come to gain a kind of sovereignty over their situation, 'taking the plunge' into the novel configurations of possibility that arise as a result. What if one were to resist the clash between the still too heroic-sounding decision-event and the ordinary circumstances from which it is meant to depart? What if one asked instead how far subjectivation, 'seen as the effort to be awakened to one's existence . . . may require a deeper dwelling in the everyday rather than an escape from it'? (Das, this volume, Chapter 3).

Das's chapter pursues this possibility by building on her long-standing attempt to forge a concept of the 'everyday' that goes beyond just habits and cultural conventions (e.g. Das 1995, 2007). Replacing Badiou's argument on the Event with Wittgenstein's conception of 'forms of life', she recalls her own ethnographic accounts of how particular actors who live in areas of Delhi designated by the authorities as 'unplanned settlements' forge themselves as subjects through their complex, difficult, and fragile dealings with the everyday. As an example, Das shows how the innumerable – real and imaginary – interactions between a community leader and an array of powerful authorities (the electricity company, planning authorities, political representatives, etc.) generate a shift in the way the community is framed, from 'a colony of thieves' who 'steal' electrical power from the local plant, to 'responsible consumers' whose dwellings deserve to be included in the company's remit of provisioning. Instead of a heroic moment of decision, we have here an example of the kinds of shifts in subjectivity that the slow, piecemeal, and decidedly non-heroic work of the everyday can bring about.

Das begins her chapter by speculating whether the contrast between her own focus on the everyday as a catalyst for (rather than an obstacle to) the constitution of subjects, and Humphrey's argument on the individuating effects of decision-events may be partly a function of their different fieldwork

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