



## SOME REFLECTIONS ON EDITING WITH CONTRARIAN SENSIBILITIES

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I recall my years as editor of *Cultural Anthropology* as an unending intellectual feast. Thanks to the excellent work of the first two editors—George Marcus and Fred Myers—the journal received an overabundance of high-quality manuscripts while I was editor. In particular, it seemed to me that almost all the best graduate students in cultural-social anthropology, in the United States and beyond, wanted to place a chapter of their dissertation in the journal. As a result, as editor, I had the privilege of being informed about what was emerging in the discipline—not just in one department, but quite broadly, across English-language, PhD-granting departments. Editing the journal was thus a singular opportunity both to learn from good research in cultural anthropology and to get a sense of what questions and issues were grabbing the discipline’s attention.

In addition, the overabundance of good submissions meant that the journal had the luxury of selecting which manuscripts to publish from a larger set of eminently publishable manuscripts. In this “too much of a good thing” context, my editorial sensibilities—which guided both my selection of peer reviewers and the final judgments I reached about manuscripts—were, in some ways, contrarian ones.

Starting with its first editor, George Marcus, *Cultural Anthropology* had developed a deserved reputation for always looking for “the next thing”—to quote a phrase I had heard George use more than once. I, by contrast, was skeptical

about this privileging and pursuit of the new. My own training in anthropology—particularly my work as an undergraduate studying with Jim Boon and then as a graduate student studying with George Stocking—had convinced me that considerable precedents existed for recent intellectual projects in both the discipline and related fields of inquiry, including the then-burgeoning field of cultural studies. From my perspective, seeing and representing the intellectual efforts of our own time as strikingly new erred, first, in giving ourselves more credit than we might deserve and, second, in underestimating the difficulty of disrupting and stepping outside of hegemonic systems of thought. Rather than imagining that some new move would allow us to vanquish, say, Eurocentrism or essentializing, we needed to learn from and build on long-standing struggles against them—struggles located both within and beyond our own discipline. In pursuing the social construction of racial groupings, for example, it was important to learn from the insights and limits of, notably, both Boas's and Du Bois's earlier work on race—rather than proceeding as if the project of contesting the objectivity of race constituted an innovation of our own time.<sup>1</sup>

So too, it was important to recognize that in our discipline, in contrast with the natural sciences, even the most powerful of intellectual critiques rarely vanquish received ideas, in the way that the heliocentric model of the solar system had vanquished the geocentric model. In our field of inquiry, by contrast, dismal ideas and paradigms pop up again and again (and again), even after their intellectual errors have been laid bare—very much as in an arcade game of Whack-a-Mole. Think, for example, about the perdurance of both social evolutionary understandings of social differences and functionalist accounts of social institutions. Though both have quite rightly and smartly been discredited many times within our discipline, neither has really gone away. A part of the story here is that even when these ways of thinking are critiqued *within* our discipline, they remain prevalent both in other disciplines (most more powerful than our own) and in the larger social world, including in everyday habits of language. The last in particular makes it difficult to excise these ways of thinking from our own production of knowledge, given that there can be at most a partial separation of our phatic and analytic use of language.

For me as editor, it thus followed that caution was required before moving on to the next thing, lest we neglect our unfinished business with the myriad persistent discontents of cultural and social analysis.<sup>2</sup>

At one point during my years as editor, I had a conversation about these issues with Donna Haraway. By my memory, the exchange took place at an annual

meeting of the Society for Cultural Anthropology (SCA), though it is possible it was at a conference on the University of California, Santa Cruz campus. In any case, Donna made clear her disagreement with my editorial sensibilities in this regard. Pursuing and emphasizing the new was valuable, she argued, for fostering a sense of the possibility of radical change. I found this a compelling response, and returned to it many times as I weighed the strengths and weaknesses of subsequent submissions to the journal. Yet as I continued to think about Donna's comment, it also struck me that cultural anthropology—as distinct from cultural studies—had a long-standing practice of fostering very much the sense she spoke of, though in a notably different manner. This different manner involved attending to global cultural diversity, particularly diversity beyond or at the margins of modern states, so as to doubt the absoluteness, and thus the permanence, of the familiar. Indeed, this was and remains what makes teaching introductory cultural anthropology to undergraduates so rewarding—as when we point out to our students that other social orders have possessed systems of exchange in which profit, strictly defined, cannot occur.

A second instance of my contrarian sensibilities as editor reflected my long-standing (and ongoing) dissatisfaction with the division of the human sciences into the received disciplines and, most specifically, with the existence of cultural anthropology and history as separate disciplines. This particular dissatisfaction can be expressed in many ways, but perhaps the most basic formulation would be this: if we reject the notion of static and timeless cultures, then we should recognize the importance of always locating in time (which is to say, always locating diachronically) the subjects of our inquiry. So, too, we should recognize the importance of studying, as cultural phenomena in their own right, the diverse sequences—or diachronic forms—that are discernible once we do this. As editor, I sought to nudge cultural anthropology in these closely related directions by giving editorial preference to work that was at once historical and anthropological.<sup>3</sup>

A third and final target of my editorial preferences was work that brought cultural anthropological perspectives to bear on the immediately newsworthy, producing a regular feature in the journal under the heading “In The News.”<sup>4</sup> One goal here was to have academic authors speak to broader publics; a second goal was for this work to attract some attention from persons beyond academia. Here, too, my editorial sensibility faced considerable barriers.

Indeed, given the many obstacles to each of these three editorial pursuits, one should ask, “How successful was any of this?” On the plus side, I think it fair

to say that each of my editorial preferences resulted in the publication of a good number of terrific manuscripts between 1996 and 2001. At the same time, I would also say that any larger impact has depended, as one would expect, on the extent to which any of these editorial pursuits have converged with other efforts to move in these or similar directions. Precisely for this reason, the move to interrelate the fields of cultural anthropology and history has probably had more resonances than either of the other two. Here what is salient is that the emergent subfield of history known as world history has itself developed in ways that overlap and connect with cultural anthropology.<sup>5</sup> To start with the most obvious point, world history has embraced the ideal of attending to global human diversity, thus moving sharply away from disciplinary history's long-entrenched privileging of Europe and, to shift registers, of social orders that are legible as states. At its best moments, moreover, world history has used its broadened attention to humanity to rethink established truths and produce new knowledge—thus proceeding in a manner that parallels and extends practices of defamiliarization and comparison that I spoke of above, when discussing my reflections on Donna Haraway's comments about the value of emphasizing newness.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, my comments here have emphasized my larger thematic pursuits as editor. Yet much of my time and energy as editor went into the nitty-gritty editing of paragraphs, sentences, and words. Here my goal was to help distinctive authorial voices enter the journal's pages, rather than promote some standard voice, while also fostering the practice of expressing difficult ideas clearly.

I think it is also worth noting an important practical challenge I faced as editor. When I first took up the position, the financial charges to the journal from the American Anthropological Association seemed to me at once quite high, relative to the services the association provided, and quite opaque, in terms of how the charges were calculated. Throughout several years, what was uncovered, thanks to the considerable efforts of a number of people (including SCA treasurer, Mac Marshall, and *American Ethnologist* editor, Carol Greenhouse), was that the American Anthropological Association charged section journals considerably more for its services than it charged *American Anthropologist*. Establishing this with clarity and precision led, in turn, to a reworking of the financial relationship between the association and sections that sponsored journals, much to the benefit of the latter, I am pleased to say. This too was editorial work, though of a sort that is, perhaps, too easily forgotten.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

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1. This is why, to my sensibilities, it was important to publish [Liss 1998](#).
2. It was on this basis, for instance, that I valued highly—and thus was pleased to publish—the critique of functionalist thinking in [Rosenblatt 1997](#).
3. In preparing this brief commentary, I looked back at the issues of the journal I edited to identify specific articles that had important historical components or dimensions, in addition to cultural anthropological ones. It was a nice surprise to find that there were simply too many of these for me to provide an exhaustive list here. That said, three worthy examples include [Bullard 1997](#), [Ortner 1998](#), and [Taminian 1998](#).  
I should acknowledge here that in pursuing work that combined cultural anthropological and historical elements, it could be said that I was pursuing the new and that there were thus some tensions between my different editorial goals. While I think this a valid observation, I do not find it to be a particularly damning one. Moreover, I think it is also fair to say that pursuing a hybrid of cultural anthropology and history is an attempt to work through long-standing discontents in social and cultural analysis and, on that basis, one consistent with my earlier comments.
4. Again, it is impractical to cite all of these “In The News” articles. They can be found by going back to the issues of the journal.
5. [Pomeranz and Segal 2012](#) provides an overview of the emergence of world history and is particularly concerned with the ways this subfield departs from and remains in tension with the larger discipline of history.
6. Two particularly noteworthy instances of such use of world history’s broadened attention to humanity are [Feierman 1993](#) and [Pomeranz 2000](#). [Steven Feierman \(1993, 177\)](#) uses his extensive knowledge of precolonial African histories to upend received knowledge of the relationships between “political and economic hierarchy, towns, commerce and intercommunication, writing, the plough, high densities of population, and historical dynamism”—which is to say, to upend our understanding of that bundle of traits that are conventionally said to distinguish civilizations or complex societies from simple or primitive or tribal ones. This is, in many ways, a recognizably cultural anthropological move. [Kenneth Pomeranz](#), by contrast, uses his knowledge of Chinese economic history to show that previous historians of the industrial revolution have simply presumed—without bothering to look much at the world beyond Europe—that many precursor conditions to the industrial revolution were unique to Europe, and thereby erred in attributing the industrial revolution to European specialness, in one way or another. I think it is worth noting that this comparison is much less a recognizably anthropological comparison than is [Feierman’s](#), precisely because it involves two complex societies rather than using a simple or tribal one to reconsider the familiar. We might then say that if China has been taken to be too Other to be central to historical knowledge, so too, China has been taken as not Other enough to be central to cultural anthropological knowledge. This particular two-sided marginalization may well be an important aspect, or effect, of Orientalism.
7. A second aspect of the material conditions of the journal while I was editor is also worth noting, which is that the journal was housed at a small liberal arts college (Pitzer) and used undergraduates, rather than graduate students in anthropology, as editorial assistants. That this worked so well speaks, in my view, to the often-unappreciated strengths of these peculiar institutions of higher education in the United States. That said, my own capacity to make this context work for *Cultural Anthropology* depended a great deal on having watched [Don Brenneis](#) serve as an exemplary editor of *American Ethnologist* between 1989 and 1994, while he was my senior colleague at Pitzer.

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