

ANTHROPOLOGISTS RESPONDING TO ANTHROPOLOGICAL TELEVISION

*A response to Caplan, Hughes-Freeland
and Singer (AT 21[2], 22[2-3])*

Today one should react to the utterance of 'That is not anthropology' as one would to an omen of intellectual death. Dell Hymes (as quoted in MacDougall 1998: 61)

There has been much debate around the BBC2 series *Tribe*¹ in ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY. Caplan and Hughes-Freeland claim that, although anthropology is in need of a rejuvenated public image, *Tribe* is a far cry from ideal educational ethnographic television. After conducting an extensive audience reception study,² however, we agree with

Singer that *Tribe* is more about how Parry successfully builds rapport in the first month of fieldwork than it is a science-dense account of anthropology. In other words, *Tribe* reveals the process of beginning fieldwork rather than announcing the results. *Tribe* is *anthropological television*, i.e. experiential, depictive and emergent, rather than *television about anthropology*, i.e. observational, descriptive and journalistic (MacDougall 1998). With an emphasis on the dangerous process of building knowledge, *Tribe* shares more with contemporary trends in reflexive ethnography than with the observational ethnography of the past.

Tribe is a cultural forum in which the producers, Parry and audiences negotiate the differences and similarities apparent when individuals from two cultures meet. Many anthropologists write as 'critics' exhorting viewers to rise to their educated reading of *Tribe* as unethically sensationalistic or simply to trust their judgment as being better informed on cultural issues (Newcomb and Hirsh 1994). If we can suspend our academic prejudices about the show's premise and instead engage *Tribe* with a close visual and industrial analysis, we may begin to grasp how anthropological television functions in *Tribe* and in the cultures that consume the series. In fact it demonstrates an eventful rapport-building first month of fieldwork, and the industrial constraints and visual and reflexive possibilities of anthropological television, as well as the positive public reception evident from Discovery Channel's viewer weblogs (Discovery Channel 2006).

Audiences find *Tribe* educational and entertaining; if anthropologists 'shift from a word-and-sentence-based anthropological thought to image-and-sequence-based anthropological thought' (MacDougall 2006: 225) they too may find an innovative approach to reflexive ethnography focused on an eventful encounter between indigenous people, a small film crew and a mass-mediated world. At the crux of both why anthropologists dislike and why viewers like *Tribe* is its affectivity and focus on process rather than product. Anthropologists criticize the personalizing of ethnographic research as one form (among several) of creating greater spectacle where the indigenous culture becomes the backdrop for fantasies and adventure, forgetting the influence of first person ethnographies in films and texts (Shostak 1981, MacDougall 1998). Viewers commented that Perry's reflexivity improves a dated mode of observational television about anthropology or a journalistic mode with a loud voice-over narration and burdensome scientific agenda.³ Some viewers state that the reason why *Tribe* is both entertaining and educational is precisely because Parry is *not* an anthropologist.

Tribe is not an *anthropologist's* programme about anthropology; rather it is a *people's* anthropological programme. Many viewers

read the criticism of *Tribe* by anthropologists as unjustified pigeonholing of a series based less on watching it than on a type of academic hyper-criticalness possibly originating in disciplinary identity politics and paranoias.⁴ According to some viewers, well-educated anthropologists are out of touch with viewers.⁵ Anthropologists moralize the politics of the moving image and resist an interdisciplinarity with popular culture that might expose anthropology's roots in colonial tourism and picture postcard imperialism (MacDougall 2006; 1998: 264).

To argue against *Tribe* because it is not observational television is to oppose the anthropologist to popular modes of entertainment and simultaneously viewers. Some anthropologists fear that the appropriation of the classical ethnographic context by television will defeat the aim of creating a public anthropology and magnify the identity crisis of who, what and where the field is. Merely highlighting what anthropology has lost in a systematic exchange of resources that favours television is to miss the opportunity for collaboration with television industries. Singer is exceptional in that he approaches *Tribe* both as an anthropologist who understands the importance of teaching cultural relativity through mass media and as a television producer who knows that the sensational aspects (drugs, pain, exotic food, etc.) help to entice and educate viewers while keeping ratings at a series-sustaining level. Public and media anthropologists would do well to consider adopting *Tribe's* tactics of successfully blending anthropological methods and the needs of the television industry in the reflexive recording of that exciting first eventful month of fieldwork rather than 'bemoan[ing *Tribe's*] lack of intellectual and moral accountability' (Singer 2006: 24).

Caplan's concern is that *Tribe*, primarily aimed at quotidian entertainment, presents a paltry amount of ethnographic information and is ethically bankrupt. She is missing one significant point – the programme is edited for an hour-long slot on BBC2 and 45 minutes on the Discovery Channel. Practitioners of ethnographic film and those involved in television studies will appreciate how *Tribe* maintains an accurate representation of time and space through its long takes, minimal editing effects, and subtle filmic ellipses. We agree that *Tribe* lacks anthropological data presented in a journalistic or observational mode. We have submitted a digital poster proposal to the 105th American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting in which we remix and critique *Tribe* in a manner similar to Herzog's *Grizzly man* (2005) (where Timothy Treadwell 'played' a television biologist specializing in grizzly bears; after his death, Herzog analyses, criticizes and eventually redeems Treadwell's fatal naiveté). Parry is not an anthropologist, but in an extra-diagetic and dialogic interaction with anthropologists, *Tribe* may reveal certain tendencies in ethnographic practice which we do not usually offer up to public scrutiny. Today audiences for both reflexive ethnographic film and 'reality television' appreciate having

the back-story included within the feature programme.

Caplan fears that Parry does not adequately explore the tribes' changing lifestyles and is therefore reproducing temporal essentialism. In fact Parry does examine globalization in depth in every episode.⁶ Just one example from one episode will suffice here: in 'The Horse Masters of Mongolia' he holds a conversation with his host's mother where she explains that she wants her children to find good jobs in the city rather than remaining nomadic herders.

In the second season, Parry goes back to Africa to explore further the topic of violence and tribal warfare between the Suri and Nyangatom since the introduction of M16 rifles. He offers an anthropological perspective on the nature of warfare by discussing ecology (the best land is in Suri territory), globalization (until they got M16s the Nyangatom were the weakest tribe) and rites of passage (the raid/counter-raid cycle is an ancient and seemingly endless battle over resources that brings honour to the young men). Parry also explores the Nyangatom's daily lives and initiation rituals in an attempt to humanize them, as a contrast to the episode from the first season recorded from the point of view of the Suri, thereby presenting a more dangerous and polyvocal study. The timeliness of this programme was not missed by viewers given recent events in Darfur and neighbouring areas.⁷

Like Parry in this episode, in our ethnographic filmmaking exploring tense relationships between ethnic and religious minority and majority groups in Sikkim, we have navigated through contested political, personal and geographic territories. We decided to include our personal stresses in building rapport – while wielding a camera – and mediating an exploration of the two sides in a difficult situation.

Rather than 'how not to do anthropology' (Hughes-Freeland, 2006: 23), *Tribe* could be an important pedagogical tool for introducing the first moments of establishing rapport, base camp and informants; the clumsiness, the foolish feelings, the language difficulties, the self-consciousness, the fear and the excitement are all documented and reflected upon. While most of the challenges of beginning fieldwork were either unstated or famously articulated (Malinowski 1922), it is now a signature of much valuable (and entertaining!) ethnography to discuss the process and not just the project of anthropology (Ortner 2003). Unlike a seasoned anthropologist, Parry probably has no long-term commitment to culture, power, history or advocacy. He is after subjects both anthropological and titillating enough for television. In this, we dare suggest, he is probably not too far removed from many new graduate students who plan their dissertation projects to some degree with a view to how unique their project will appear in the context of current trends in anthropological practice, or how their dissertation might become a popular book should academic jobs be unavailable.

Anthropology's inability to generate a substantial television audience results from academic elitism, and anthropologists' paranoia

about television may be part of disciplinary identity politics. We should shed the erroneous ethos that 'ethnographic filmmaking should be the exclusive province of anthropologists interested in making pictorial ethnographies' (Ruby 2000: 239), that viewers are duped into racist worldviews by orientalizing television, and that entertainment is uncritical escapism. Threads of entertainment and education course through *Tribe*, allowing viewers to braid cross-cultural encounters in a global world. As the boundaries separating the rural and the urban, the wild and the domestic, the provincial and the cosmopolitan are further eroded by the pervasiveness of global media, migration and macroeconomics, so too will the discrete subjects of anthropologist and television producer, and indigene and viewer, tend to merge.

If anthropology is to have a future in this transnational multimediated world to come, we are going to need to apply our tools of cultural relativity to television programmes, producers, hosts and audiences. Before we become shareholders in the future of anthropological television we must become better ethnographers of the modes of media production and reception. ●

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1. The majority of our research has been with the slightly shorter US version on Discovery Channel, entitled *Going tribal (GT)*; we watched all six *GT* and three of the BBC2's *Tribe*. To avoid confusion, all references to *Tribe* also refer to *Going Tribal*.

2. We have just completed an audience reception study of the Discovery Channel's *Going tribal* weblogs (<http://community.discovery.com/eve/forums/a/cfrm/f/5861949408>). There were approximately 360 entries on the website. We discovered that there were two cultures, anthropologists and 'viewers', who both have strong opinions about *Going tribal*. Caplan's (2005) response typifies those who self-identified as anthropologists, who considered the programme sensationalist. Viewers, however, argued against the anthropologists, stating that *Going tribal* was educational and entertaining.

3. '[...] better to have something documented from a human perspective than by an anthropological perspective, like ANY human would react if in contact with these people. Generations to come can at least fantasize about it, and it's harder to do it with an educated anthropologist even if he's likeable'. rebekinha, Discovery weblog, posted 7 September 2005, 11.20 am.

4. 'Anthropologists a lot of times label everything and think they know everything just by studying their subjects or living with them for a while.' Rebekinha, Discovery weblog, posted 7 September 2005, 11.20 am. 'If anything is a recurring theme on Discovery Channel, it is to open your mind to other things. It is not pick and choose and then criticize those that don't exactly appeal to you.' laurajeantx, Discovery weblog, posted 17 May 2006, 4.48 pm.

5. 'I really think you don't understand the average person [...] The average person would rather have his eyes gouged out with an ice cream scoop than watch a responsibly produced documentary. Remember – we are talking about the average person here... Most people I know think I'm a dork because I watch the Discovery Channel. Imagine what they would think of a responsibly produced documentary!' dragonflykarate, Discovery weblog, posted 17 August 2005, 04.24 pm. 'I do think that *Going Tribal* is more of a positive influence on the average American than a negative one.' wyck, Discovery weblog, posted 23 August 2005, 05.00 pm.

6. Parry usually begins by saying that he wants to 'understand in a small way what their lives are like' and often comments that traditional cultures are vanishing and he wants to see and record them before radical changes occur.

7. '[...] the conflict in Darfur has experienced a similar escalation... the heart of the conflict is just as primitive as

the bad blood between the tribe that Parry visited'. apley, Discovery weblog, posted: 3 May 2006.

8. The Center for Landscape & Artefact (<http://adamfish.bol.ucla.edu>) is a non-profit organization dedicated to merging new media and media anthropology.

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ANTHROPOLOGY OF CROSS-CHANNEL DEBATES

A response to Fassin (AT22[1]) and Bazin et al (AT22[2])

In his last preface to the oft-republished book *Orientalism*, a few months before his death, Edward Said reiterated his commitment to the humanistic task of 'opening up the fields of struggle' (Said 2003). More specifically, he once again called for his famous book to be read not as an invective against the West (as it had so often been understood by detractors and supporters alike), but as an attempt to challenge the West/Orient and West/Islam divides themselves. Particularly in a post-9/11 world, he argued,

a special intellectual and moral responsibility attaches to what we do as scholars and intellectuals. Certainly I think it is incumbent upon us to complicate and/or dismantle the reductive formulae and the abstract but potent kind of thought that leads the mind away from concrete human history and human experience and into the realms of ideological fiction, metaphysical confrontation and collective passion. [...] Our role is to widen the field of discussion, not to set limits in accord with the prevailing authority. (ibid.: xvii-xviii)

Regardless of whether *Orientalism* itself has actually helped or hindered this process, Said's plea to rethink the supposed opposition between 'Islam and the West' points to one of the most pressing issues of concern for anthropologists in the present day. But besides this major and far from straightforward task (cf. Tarlo, AT 21[6]), recent contributions on the subject of France in ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY suggest another, smaller yet possibly essential, item on our anthropological to-do list: to rethink the rift between so-called 'multiculturalist' and 'French republican' (from now on 'Republican') models of society.

Didier Fassin (AT 22[1]) and Laurent Bazin et al. (AT 22[2]) have made it clear: those who

wish to gain an anthropological understanding of the French *banlieues* will need to discard (or suspend) the French republican notion according to which ethnicity does not form a valid category for analysis. The republican approach makes 'visible minorities' invisible – but unfortunately so far to statisticians,¹ rather than to racists. An informed anthropology of the *banlieues* cannot be done from a dogmatically republican framework.

But from what position can we undertake an anthropology of the republican framework itself? When republicanism is described as a 'political' or a 'state myth', the assumption is usually that it is the misrepresentation of an underlying multicultural reality. In Fassin's contribution, this is accompanied by a suggestion that France is due finally and inexorably to open its eyes to this reality, which has long been evident to foreign researchers working there. French proponents of republicanism are likely to object, with Keith Hart, that English-speaking observers' distaste for 'republican' policies 'reflects an unthinking multi-cultural liberalism' (AT 21[1]), rather than ontological far-sightedness.

But mine is a different objection: firstly, republicanism in France, and multiculturalism in the UK and US, are not straightforward national orthodoxies, but rather matters of ongoing debate (cf. Modood and Werbner 1997, Eller 1997, Hewitt 2005). In France, the republican model has its detractors and its supporters, and both camps are furnished, as such camps often are, with a mix of the reasonable, the well-informed and the crudely simplistic and, I might add, with committed humanists and rather more unsavoury characters.

Secondly, what makes such debates fascinating is that they are centrally concerned with the definition of reality. Take for instance this characteristic exchange between the European Commission against Racism and Inequality (ECRI) and the French state. In a recent report, ECRI admonished France to recognize that it was a 'multiracial' entity. The 'French authorities'² responded: 'Although ECRI feels it must consider that "de facto, [minority groups] exist" [...] it must be pointed out that there is no consensus of opinion on this assessment of French sociological reality in the country itself' (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2000). They went on to suggest not, as some might expect, some kind of 'integrated' France, but a complex 'sociological reality' made up of individuals with multiple, partial and conflicting identities, which any 'multicultural' or 'multiracial' reading could only misrepresent.

Some will dismiss this as a cynical post-modern cover for institutional racism, others will hail it as the accurate statement of the complexity of individual self-understandings which multiculturalism tends to forget. But my point is that neither reaction leads us to an informed anthropological study of the debate as a whole. And I contend that such a study is overdue for anthropologists who, as Bazin et al. point out, should be truly at home with anthropology 'at home' (AT 22[2]) – including the anthropology of the very debates they are

engaged in. This understanding of the debate is not the opposite of engagement, but a precondition for it.

Since what is at stake is precisely the definition of reality, such a study is unlikely to be particularly enlightening if it works from the framework of false consciousness. If the starting point of the analysis is that republicanism is merely a myth covering a multicultural reality (or the reverse), then there is little left to elucidate.

A more promising starting point is the principle that reality is not independent from the tools which are used to describe it. Both multiculturalism and republicanism could be seen as performative attempts to establish a certain kind of reality (Austin 1975, Pels 2002). This means that, rather like the ethnic or cultural differences which are its main focus, the republican/multicultural difference is in a powerful sense both 'there' and 'not there'. Like cultural difference, or the so-called 'clash of civilizations' (Tarlo AT 21[6]), it is both an obviously 'constructed' and constantly transgressed abstraction, and a performative principle in a constant process of self-realization.

Of course, in order to understand the French riots of Autumn 2005, we cannot take for granted the republican version of sociological reality, in which ethnic groups are a forbidden unit of analysis. Processes of ethnicization and racism undoubtedly played a part in the riots, all the more so for not being officially recognized. But neither can we overlook the fact that this republican notion has *shaped reality* to the extent that the riots never became in any straightforward sense 'race riots', for instance.

I doubt we will understand the multiculturalism/republicanism debate if we persist in thinking of either position as either truth or myth. If, as I have suggested, they are not just accounts of, but also *operations upon* reality, then we should attempt to study them 'symmetrically' (Callon 1986, Latour 1991) that is, to study the difference between them without first taking it (and the respective reality posited by each approach) for granted. In other words, we need to bring the multiculturalism/republicanism difference itself *into the ethnographic frame*. This does not involve a disengagement from these debates, or some flight to a neutral position: it just means being fully aware of the performative nature of our own contribution, and that of others.

Who knows but that this small item on the to-do list might help us along to Said's larger one. ●

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1. Or rather it did so until recently. The famous 1978 law – held up in France as a central element in the state's anti-racist policy – which renders illicit the collection or treatment of data concerning 'racial or ethnic origins, political, philosophical or religious opinions', has recently been amended. Data of this kind can now be collected for medical or legal reasons, as well as in the name of 'public interest'. Political, philosophical and religious groups are entitled to collect data relevant to their denomination (although from their members only). Finally, according to this ruling, the national statistics agency (INSEE) itself is now entitled to collect and treat such data (2004; 1978).

2. No more specific authorship is available. The following quotations are drawn from the appendix to the