***From Savage to Good:***

***A Brief Genealogy of Anthropology***

***By Route of the Primitive, the Dark, and the Suffering Subject***

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History is always in part a history of the present, reflecting our figure-ground relation to the past. So too, arguably, anthropology over the decades has arguably reflected its particular time and place as this has changed over time. We can presently consider this in relation to the terms "savage" and "primitive" in our field. First, some objective evidence concerning the validity of our session statement can be taking from *ngram* – Google's calculation of the frequency of word use in English language books.
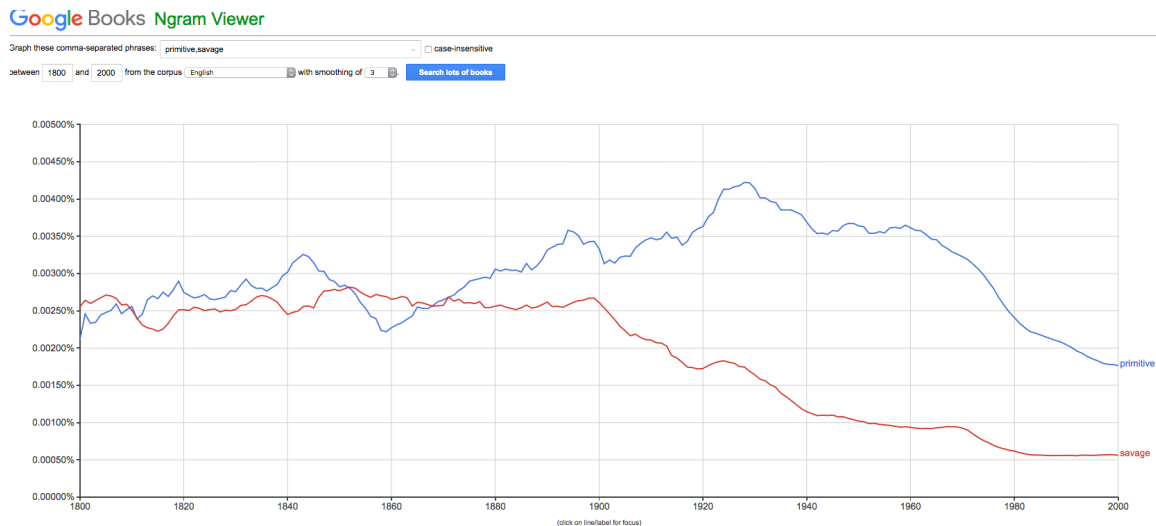


"Savage" and "primitive" were used with roughly the same frequently during the bulk of the 19th century, but this changed toward its end. The widening gap, by which "primitive" increased in usage while that of "savage" declined, accelerated from the late 19th century and became greatest from about 1910 to 1960s (after which the use of both terms

declined markedly).  Intriguingly, the bulk of this period was when Boas' key work was published and influential in legacy. *The Mind of Primitive Man* was published in 1911, for instance. How much of this is causation and how much a correlation caused by other features of Western sociocultural change is itself an interesting question.  The divergence between the "savage" and the "primitive," with the ascendance of the latter, started well before Boas' work, which is revealing, as we shall see.

A factor that helps tease apart the connotation of these concepts is their different nuances in French versus English.  Lévy-Bruhl published his five major books on the primitive – the word "primitive" appearing in the title of each – from 1923 to 1938.  Lévy-Bruhl was almost an exact contemporary of Boas – born just one year earlier, in 1857, and dying just three three years before him, in 1939. Durkheim uses "primitive" in his 1903 work with Mauss on *Primitive Classification* – though he switches from "primitive" to "elementary forms" of religious life in his 1912 magnum opus on Australian religion.

"Primitif" in French conveys roughly the same sense as in English – a neutral term of being prior in evolutionary stage or origin, less complex, less developed, but without a particularly negative moral connotation, particularly in contrast to "savage." This said, for all of his path-breaking contributions to anti-racism and cultural relativism, Boas in *The Mind of Primitive Man* still *did* consider primitive man as being more irrational and governed by mystical delusion – more in line more with Frazer, Tylor and Lévy-Bruhl himself than we now admit or feel comfortable with.  And he suggested that the "negro race" "would not produce quite so many men of highest genius as other races" (Boas 10911:268).  But in general, the "primitive" as opposed to the "more complex," or "more developed" is a neutral term morally and ethically – though a developmental deficit in relation to civilized rationality was also part of its baggage.  Boas emphasized the social and cultural conditions upon which mental capacity and expression were formulated, not its biological or genetic endowment.  Not yet part of the anthropological package were the dehumanizing excesses of modern rationality identified by Max Weber shortly after 1900 in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1958), much less those of Marx' critique in his early Paris manuscripts or his writings on precapitalist formations (Marx 1971, 2000:ch.8).

In contrast to "primitive," "savage," or "*sauvage*" in French, arguably has different connotations across the two languages.   In English, "savage" carries a stronger sense of

violent brutality, of viciousness, of animality, of inhuman and out-of-control depravity and evil. One finds the word much more commonly in derogatory travelogues and early proto-ethnography in places like Melanesia; I ran across the word significantly in 19th and early 20th century accounts of Melanesian warfare and sexuality for instance (e.g., Knauft 1990a, 1990b). [Malinowski also uses "savages" in his 1929 *Sexual Lives of the Savages,* though it is a tamer book than either savage or sex would imply. Perhaps his own polyglot background influenced his choice of words.]

In French, *sauvage* has a different connotation than in English, more of a sense of being unfettered and free than vicious or violent. The exception that may prove the rule is Lévi-Stauss' *La Pensée Sauvage,* (1962), which literally means "wild pansy" in French as well as its translation into English as "*The Savage Mind*" – a poignant double entendre. In French, *sauvage* has synonyms such as "natural," "isolated," "untamed," "undomesticated," "unfrequented," and "abandoned," which don't resonate so much with the English usage.

Hopefully this throws into relief the English connotations of the two concepts that can be useful for considering their English language genealogy of usage from the 19th through at least the mid-20th century.

The Reign of the Primitive

To be brief, one could say that early anthropology, especially in England, harbored something of a contest or dispute between connotations of the savage in relation to what was increasingly called or insinuated as the primitive during the 1840s-1870s. The latter emphasis is evident in the early impetus in England to counter imperial domination, subjugation, and cultural eradication of non-Western subjects. These concerns were galvanized by the British Foreign Aborigines Protection Society, which was founded by Quaker physician, armchair ethnographer, and political activist Thomas Hodgkin in 1837, and then succeeded by the development of the more scholarly Ethnological Society of London (ESL), which Hodgkin also helped form, in 1842 -- and which itself became the Anthropological Society, which was the forerunner to the venerable Royal Anthropological Institute (Rainger 1980). This lineage of anthropological thought – whose ideas resonated with the native as "primitive" rather than "savage," contrasted markedly with the more racist and polygenic orientation of James Hunt, who had originally founded the Anthropological Society as a rival organization to the Ethnological

Society in 1863 (Rainger 1980; Stocking 1987:ch. 2). The tension between these societies, and between Hodgkin and Hunt, was between a more "savage" view of racially degraded and almost non-human Others and a more humanizing view of them as simply less developed but no less human or deserving of compassion than Westerners. (It can be noted that Darwin's *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex,* published in 1871, gave special weight to sympathy as the greatest distinguishing factor of human as opposed to other species.) Interestingly, the greater English language use of "primitive" over "savage" begins during this same period, the 1860s and 1870s. This development arguably foreshadows the shift from "savage" to "primitive" that we see in American anthropology toward the turn of the 20th century, reflected especially the work of Boas. [We can note that Morgan's 1877 *Ancient Society* did divide the stages of human development into savagery, barbarism, and civilization. But Morgan emphasized that the absolute "advances" of humanity in the earliest stages – marked by developments such as the advent of language and the use of fire during the period of "savagery" – outstripped the magnitude of later human developments in absolute scale and importance.]

The idea that increasingly took root was that "primitive" peoples, though they may be simple in technology and small in scale, can be equal or even superior to ourselves in features of human sociality, profound expressiveness, and connection with nature. Boas emphasized in a myriad of ways, ethnographically as well as in his well-known anti-racism, anti-Semitism, and defense of immigrants and of what we now call subaltern peoples and cultures more generally (e.g., Lewis 2001). Under Boas and others, this revisionist strain of anthropology combined features of 19th century German romanticism with the notion that systematic knowledge of non-Western peoples should inform Anthropology as an empirical science.

Before moving on, it is important to note just how long and deep the imprint of the primitive has been in anthropology. Indeed, it was probably the dominant focus and concern of anthropology as an object of knowledge and understanding for a full century, from the 1860s to the 1960s. As Adam Kuper notes at the beginning of *The Invention of Primitive Society* (Kuper 1988:1):

> The rapidity with which the anthropological idea of primitive society was worked

out is very striking, but its persistence is perhaps yet more extraordinary. Conventional histories of anthropology describe a succession of quasi-philosophical theories – evolutionism, diffusionism, functionalism, structuralism, etc.  Each reigned briefly and then was rudely overthrown. Yet all these theoretical traditions address the same idea of primitive society.  The persistence of this prototype for well over a hundred years is the more remarkable since empirical investigation of topical 'primitive' societies only began in a systematic way and on any scale in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

If we crudely periodize from the start, we might say that the trope of the "savage" – or to follow Bakhtin (1983), the chronotope of the "savage" – was prominent in pre-anthropology and some forms of early anthropology to the mid-19th century. Then, for a century, from roughly the 1860s to the 1960s, and certainly from the late 19th century through the 1950s, the primitive was a dominant object of anthropological interest and conceptual focus.

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Dominant Chronotopes in Anthropology

-Early -> late-19th century Polygenic Anthropology = the SAVAGE

➔**-Mid-19th -> Mid-20th century Mainstream Anthropology = the PRIMITIVE**

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Other papers in this session will detail these issues more specifically in the early 20th century than I will attempt here.  For my own present purposes, I'll simply telescope and assume the early 20th century emergence of the "primitive" in American anthropology and move to a later developments – the dropping off of the primitive as an important concept or issue in anthropology.  (We can note from the *ngram* chart that usage of "primitive" as well as "savage" has declined significantly since the mid-1960s.)  This begs the transition from an anthropological emphasis on the primitive to the post-World War Two period of increasing theoretical diversity.

I will attempt to briefly unpack this.

<u>The Eclipse of the Primitive and the "Rise" of "Theory"</u>

With the mid-twentieth century passing of Kroeber and others of his generation – the direct intellectual descendants of Boas – American anthropology started to develop in new ways after the 1950. Decolonization combined with post-war globalization to elevate the standards and nations of non-Western peoples to new prominence. Gradually but in increasing numbers, anthropologists started studying peoples in relation to larger and more contemporary frames of reference, not just "primitives" in marginal isolated settings.  This impetus articulated in turn with the 1960s and 1970s Western social upheavals, including civil rights, feminism, and the anti-Viet Nam War movement (see Knauft 2013).  Interest in the primitive waned.  And yet, as will be suggested further below, key assumptions that informed our field's interest in the primitive have not gone, but rather have been newly expressed in reversed guises.

I myself am just old enough myself to have gotten what was quite possibly the final phase of "primitivist" graduate training and teaching in anthropology (along with other more current approaches) at the University of Michigan during the 1970s.  This included what was probably or perhaps one of the last major primitivist books in Anthropology, Stanley Diamond's *In Search of the Primitive:  A Critique of Civilization,* first published in 1974. Significantly and presciently, the subtitle of the book signals the owl-of-Minerva flight of the primitive itself. The book both romanticizes primitive peoples and cultures as positive and good –  noble savages ala Rousseau – and polarizes them against the ostensible but *not* actual advances of civilization. Diamond castigates civilization as dehumanized and dehumanizing, including its overemphasis on bleached rational thought; its failure to appreciate the poetic, aesthetic, and natural; and its violent oppression and dispossession of non-Western peoples. Indeed, the year after the book's publication, in 1975, Diamond founded the Marxist journal *Dialectical Anthropology*.

The switch from shining the light of anthropology on simpler, more remote so-called primitive peoples to a critique of Western hagiographic views of itself was part and

parcel of 1960s and 1970s Western intellectual and popular political development. From the 1960s to the 1980s, as Sherry Ortner suggested in 1984 in her highly influential article "Anthropology Since the Sixties," contending approaches during the 1980s proliferated in the form of symbolic anthropology ala Geertz; cultural materialism ala Harris or Marxism ala Eric Wolf, and social structure in relation to either Radcliffe-Brownian structural-functionalism or French structuralism ala Lévi-Strauss. Increasingly, emphasis on the primitive – and on the kind of small remote societies it evoked – was superseded. By the time Rolph-Trouillot published his influential paper, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot," in 1991, the "savage" was not used as an attribution to ethnographic Others but employed in critical irony, especially Trouillot's critique of the failure of postmodernism and of reflexive anthropology to adequately address global inequality and imperial domination. In that particular sense, he suggests, the newfangled approaches in anthropology of the late 1980s and early 1990s were themselves still tarred with the brush of the primitive that they thought they had absolutely rejected.

The shift from the 1960s to post-primitive topics of interest was accompanied in anthropology by a burgeoning of new and competing theoretical paradigms. Under Boas, "theory" had been rather latent if not absent; Boas was far better at poking empirical holes in the larger theories of others than developing or promulgating a better theoretical alternative (see Boas 1940). It was as if relentless Boasian emphasis on ethnographic specifics made any kind of larger theory at once inadequate and problematic. Exceptions developed over time, including Benedict's psychological patterning of culture in the 1930s and 40s (Benedict 1934, 1946), and Kroeber's interest, starting a bit earlier, in the cyclical peaks and valleys of what were considered to be civilizations (e.g., Kroeber 1944). But neither these nor other competing approaches moved Boas' desciptivist focus on the primitive from center stage in American anthropology. What might be called primitivist nominalism was also ethnographically foregrounded in the influence of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown in England, though with somewhat greater functionalist and structural-functionalist overlay, respectively.

In American anthropology during the 1960s, however, theoretical developments

mushroomed and differentiated across three broad levels of sociocultural life that had been previously delineated in a kind of layer-cake model by Kroeber and by eminent sociologist Talcott Parsons: the material, the social and the symbolic (see Knauft 1996:ch.1). Indeed, as proclaimed by Harris through the lens of his own materialism, this was the era of a notion of, as he titled his massive 1968 history of anthropology, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory.*

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**Dominant Theoretical Emphases 1960s – 1980s**

Cultural –>  Symbolic Anthropology (e.g., Geertz)

“Superorganic / Superstructure”

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Social  -> Social Anthropology (e.g., Radcliffe-Brown)

“Social Structure”

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Material -> Materialism (e.g., Harris vs. Marx)

“Infrastructure”

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By the 1960s, each of these levels was considered to have it own theoretical engine of explanation (see Knauft 1996:ch1). Cultural materialism ala Marvin Harris  -- or critical materialism ala Marx -- supplied an anthropological theory of infrastructure. British structural-functionalism ala Radcliffe-Brown provided an anthropological theory of social relations. And Geertzian symbolic anthropology provided an anthropological theory of culture, including of what Kroeber previously called the superorganic – and what materialists called the superstructure.

In Ortner's 1984 formulation, practice theory per Bourdieu in France (and per Giddens in the UK) became a productive way to combine and synthesize the relative strength of the

these layer-cake-divided theorizations, ostensibly without giving up their respectively important and distinctive theoretical zeitgeists.

So far, then we could crudely add in this presumed overall progression as something like the following:

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        **➔-1960s - 1980s = the cusp between the PRIMITIVE and the MODERN**

        **Layer-cake levels of Material /–/ Social /–/ Symbolic Theory**

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<u>Theory in and Since the Eighties</u>

By the 1980s, the polarizations and debates and contributions of competing levels of anthropological theorization, including as they were applied to increasing ranges of non-primitive peoples, began to lose steam. And during the mid-and late 1980s, and into the 90s, all these theories were side-swiped, some would say swamped – by postmodern and reflexive or experimental approaches in anthropology (think James Clifford (1988, Clifford and Marcus 1986), George Marcus (Marcus and Fischer 1986), Jean Baudrillard (1988, 1994), and so forth. This hyper-relativizing influence has since died down, especially since about 2000, and certainly since 9/11 -- though the work of Foucault, who is outside the modernist stream while not being postmodern – has continued and if anything grown in influence (e.g., Foucault 1984).

A lasting legacy of these approaches has nonetheless been greatly increased reflexivity in anthropology, including much greater, more explicit, and more consistent awareness than before of our political subject positioning as anthropological authors and agents. On the

other hand, postmodern and experimental or hyper-reflexive perspectives in anthropology have not become the field's principal or dominant focus, as was feared by many back during the 1980s and 1990s.

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    Layer-cake levels of Material /–/ Social /–/ Symbolic Theory

    **[Practice theory synthesis <-> Postmodern rejectionism]**

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Finally we come to anthropology's more recent thematic progression.  I have elsewhere suggested, in recent years, socio-cultural anthropology has become increasingly post-paradigmatic, with anthropologists having less and less allegiance to *any* singular line of theoretical orientation or great person ancestry. Some of this is due to the lasting impact of reflexive and postmodern approaches that reject overarching or grand narratives (Knauft 2006).  And some is due to the fact that anthropology has, for better and also for worse, become increasingly shy of explicit comparativism between and across societies and cultures.  Rather, theorizations tend to be "middle range," with important covering concepts standing in as rough indexes or icons or larger penumbras of analytic and theoretical significance.

Of particular importance and influence of late are a pair of stock-taking articles about recent directions in anthropology by Joel Robbins (2013) and Sherry Ortner (2016) – the later framing her contribution as a characterization of "theory since the eighties," that is, an explicit update and recasting of her influential stock-taking article of the 1980s. Though assessing the recent history of the present is always a tenuous endeavor – and

though other competing assessments could also be considered -- the contributions by Ortner and by Robbins have gained particular attention and influence. Further, they are strongly resonant with each other and are mutually reinforcing in overall assessment. In the mix, as I have elsewhere discussed (Knauft in press) these two considerations underscore the increasing tendency toward what might be called "conceptual" rather than "theoretical" anthropology – they denote emphases by means of broad covering concepts that are not so much theoretically delineated as "implicational" in extensive signification. This is particularly evident when one compares Ortner's recent contribution (2016) to her earlier one (1984), which had a much more explicit delineation of emergent theoretical direction (ibid.).

[Robbins' article was subject to a 50-page published debate by major scholars in *Critique of Anthropology* (2015, vol., 34, No. 4). In the same year, a special issue of *Hau* was devoted to "Happiness: Horizons of Purpose." Ortner's piece received extended professional commentary in *Hau* (2016, vol. 6, No. 2). Both pieces are cited with great frequency. At the time of writing, a paper on "The Checkered History of Dark Anthropology" is the lead article in the most recent issue of *American Anthropologist* (Rodseth 2018).]

Though developed in interestingly different ways, these two influential contributions suggest in recent decades, and particularly since the 1980s, that cultural anthropologists have foregone their prior interest in the primitive – what Trouillot called the lingering "savage slot" -- and instead focused squarely on modern peoples and societies. Further, they suggest that this focus has corresponded with a dominant anthropological emphasis – following Marx and Foucault -- on harsh dimensions of social life that reflect the effects of modern power, domination, and oppression. As such, anthropologists have attended increasingly to the forces that inform or condition the modern suffering, oppression, and/or immisseration of non-Western and also Western peoples. Along these lines, recent decades have seen socio-cultural anthropology "Dark Anthropology" (Ortner) that has as its primary interest not the primitive but the modern "suffering subject? (Robbins).

We could schematize this development as follows:

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　　　　-1960s - 1980s = on the cusp of the Primitive and the MODERN

　　　　Layer-cake levels of Material /–/ Social /–/ Symbolic Theory

　　　　[Practice theory synthesis <-> Postmodern rejectionism]

　　　　　　**➔-1980s – c. 2010 = Anthropology of the Modern**
　　　　　　**Dark Anthropology / Anthropology of the Suffering Subject**

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Theoretically, this emphasis is often associated with the critique of capitalism and neoliberalism as informed, for instance, by Marxist scholars such as David Harvey, or by the critique of governmentality or bio-power ala Foucault.

Toward a Better Anthropology, an Anthropology of the Good?

As if with further reciprocating resonance, Ortner and Robbins each suggest that anthropology's emphasis on Dark Anthropology / the Suffering Subject is now starting to run its course – and in some ways is beginning to be importantly complemented or reversed. Both suggest that since about 2010, anthropology's preoccupation with suffering and victimization has been increasingly realized to be overbearing, one-sided, and culturally reductive. As such, its purchase and its dominance has started to wane. In contrast, they suggest that since about 2010, anthropologists have increasingly shifted focus to a complementary and counterthrusting emphasis -- on what they both call, following Robbins' initial contribution, an "Anthropology of the Good." This newer

focus foregrounds how people assert positive cultural value, meaning, and resilience, including under difficult, troubling, or oppressive conditions. As such, both Ortner and Robbins suggest that in the last very few years, anthropology has seen the beginning of another sea change, a shift to focus increasingly on the *positive resilience* rather than on the dark oppression of peoples around the world – on their ethics, care, well-being, resilience, morality, creativity, and happiness. At the same time, as Ortner (2016) is at pains to stress, an Anthropology of the Good draws upon and continues to combine actively with earlier forms of critique and activist engagement. The larger thrust and emphasis, however, is to recuperate in a new key Anthropology's longstanding and sometimes recently neglected emphasis and appreciation of cultural diversity, meaning, and nuance – the plethora of values and aspirations across the world that give richness to culture and meaning to people's lives.

Graphically, we could depict this assessment as follows:

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        -1960s - 1980s  = on the cusp of the Primitive and the Modern

        Layer-cake levels of Material – Social – Symbolic Theorization

        [Practice theory synthesis <-> Postmodern rejectionism]

          **-1980s – c. 2010 = Anthropology of the Modern**

          **Dark Anthropology / Anthropology of Suffering Subjects**

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          **-2010 -> Anthropology of the Good**
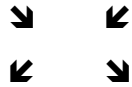
The More Things Stay the Same . . .

I conclude with a provocation.  This is that the ostensible or suggested present turn from **Dark** Anthropology to an Anthropology of the **Good** _revisits_ and _returns_ in a more reflexive and modern key to the recuperative shift to the good primitive as opposed to the dark savage that occurred in Anthropology during the latter part of the 19th and the early 20th century.

In 19th century racist polygenic anthropology  and pre-anthropology, the "savage" connoted ethical, moral, and uncivilized backwardness, a darkness of other peoples that both begged and precluded their being civilized and literally enlightened.  Against and in opposition to this, "the primitive" – in its own past-present of meaning and understanding at the time – showed the anthropological and ethnographic Other to be good, worthy of respect, and worthy of learning from -- people who were good on their own terms, not some wandering or sinful lost tribe of Israel (cf., Stocking 1987:ch.5).

In Dark Anthropology, as presaged by Stanley Diamond, the Boasian implication came out of the closet and was made reflexive:  blame and backwardness should not be put on the backs of the primitive Other but should be reversed and made an onus of civilization.  The idea that we need to critique our own Western structural and historical context, including in relation to our own subject position, puts the light of darkness, so to speak, not on the people studied but on Western and related modern structures of superordinate power.  This critique, including of what we now call neoliberalism, is explicitly foregrounded by Ortner as integral to contemporary Dark Anthropology and the Anthropology of the Suffering Subject.  Correspondingly, what was in an older anthropology the good of the Western civilizing mission is now debunked and reattributed to native Others who are now themselves also modern – as was implicit for primitives in the work of Boas, and made explicit for them in Diamond.

| 19ᵗʰ century | c. 2010 -> future |
|---|---|
| <u>Regressive Anthropology "then"</u> | <u>Progressive anthropology "now"</u> |
| | |
| Savage Other = **Dark** | Modern Other = *GOO* |
| ↘ ↙ | |
| ↙ ↘ | |
| Anthropology = *GOOD* | Anthropology = **Dark** |

Before, in the mid-19ᵗʰ century, the dark was attributed to the heathen and the savage – for instance, Melanesia, the dark savage islands. More recently, this darkness has been turned around and made reflexively attributed to anthropology itself, not dark *Others*, but Dark *Anthropology*. This attends to the darkness visited *onto* others as modern subjects – revisiting for native Others the Aboriginal Protection Society and the early Ethnological Society of the 1830s and 40s. In both cases, suffering, trauma, and victimization are seen as results of our own modern imposition. In complementary fashion, the currently assessed trend is that Anthropology is to now attend more fully to the *good* of other people, not as primitives, but as good in their own modern right, outside of any evolutionary standard of so-called development or advancement or improvement.

To be crude, early 19ᵗʰ century racist anthropology and pre-anthropology had "Anthropology" as part of the civilizing "good," and the native Others as "dark," unenlightened both physically and morally. Against this, emphasis on the "primitive" stated or at least implied that native Others were themselves already "good" on their own: they didn't need to be made good by civilizing or enlightening influences. This shift began in the mid-19ᵗʰ century in England and was expanded in relation to the strong legacy and influence of Boas in the 20ᵗʰ century. Now, as if to put a capstone on this reversal, the Good becomes explicitly delineated as the province of the Other, while the Dark becomes the conditions people have to grapple with as bequeathed by the modern forces behind anthropology's own position of critique.

This is neither to say that Anthropology repeats itself slavishly, nor that our field has fully

transcended its earlier preoccupations.  The point, rather, is that both are partially the case; the themes and emphases of previous decades and even centuries are not gone, even if they are, as if in structural inversion, altered in attribution. What results is not "progress" in anthropology, but, at least hopefully, a greater sensitivity to the nuance and relation between our changing optics in relation to each other over time.  Historical considerations of our field aid this process of self-awareness.  In our present circumstances, as I have argued elsewhere (Knauft in press), this entails a more engaged and subtle ethnographic consideration of the relationship *between* what may be subordinating, dominating, and oppressive, on the one hand, and what betokens positive value, meaning, and resilience, on the other. The point is not to "resolve" anthropology's larger theoretical or conceptual oppositions. It is rather to work creatively and productively with and through their terms:  to move beyond our previous myopias and create newly nuanced understandings between and among them, in engaged application to the present.  This initiative can draw powerfully on anthropology's past contributions to create new ones that, over time, will beg their own refinement.

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