

Good anthropology in dark times: Critical appraisal and ethnographic application

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'Dark Anthropology' and its complementary 'Anthropology of the Good' have become influential and debated notions in anthropology in recent years. I here parse distinctive features of these emphases, address their relation to theory and to ethnography, and consider the stakes involved in concretely applying their conceptual designations. I discuss the general shift in anthropology from grand theory to key concept, and the topical delimitation of theory that results. In larger purview, Dark Anthropology and the Anthropology of the Good both have long theoretical genealogies as well as practical contexts of political and social understanding, including vis-à-vis recent events in the U.S. and elsewhere. I suggest that considering the relationship *between* politico-economically structured inequality and attempts to assert positive meaning and purpose is the most productive way to ethnographically apply their alternative conceptualisations. This brings to greater focus the thorny question of whose understanding of inequality or suffering, or of moral value and positive wellbeing, is being articulated—the sentiments of the people studied, or the concepts of the analyst? It seems vital to examine both analytic and indigenous views of dark times, and of the good, to refine our understanding of both, that is, in order to consider our complementary conceptualisations in relation to both sides of the emic/etic coin. This refines our understanding of local sensibilities and also of the appropriate limit points of our own conceptual associations.

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Every few years, a new theme catches fire in anthropology and stirs intense discussion and debate. Such is the case with Sherry Ortner's (2016) portrayal of so-called Dark Anthropology and Joel Robbins' (2013) resonating consideration of what he terms the anthropology of the suffering subject. Though developed in interestingly different ways, both these articles suggest that in recent decades, and particularly since the 1980s, cultural anthropologists have focused especially on harsh dimensions of social life that reflect the effects of power, domination, and oppression. Both these contributions find anthropological preoccupation with suffering and victimisation to be somewhat overbearing and one-sided, and both

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champion a complementary emphasis on what they both call, following Robbins' initial contribution, an anthropology of the good. This foregrounds how people assert positive cultural value, meaning, and resilience, including under difficult, troubling, or oppressive conditions.

Both of the above-mentioned articles have received great and in some ways mounting attention. 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).

From my own perspective, Ortner's and Robbins' seminal papers reflect what I have elsewhere called the post-paradigmatic state of contemporary anthropology (Knauft 2006). This includes our contemporary tendency to shy away from large or grand-scale theory and focus instead on mid-range concepts—concepts that have broad applicability but neither an explicitly developed theoretical justification nor specific criteria for ethnographic application. This is not a criticism so much as a sociology-of-knowledge observation about the kinds of contributions that now gain traction and influence in our field (cf. Mannheim 2015). Conceptualisations such as Dark Anthropology and the Anthropology of the Good can have significant value as semi-congealed or 'fuzzy set' assessments that foment fresh awareness and creative new emphases without being shackled to more contentious assertions of theoretical lineage on the one hand, or nitpicking ethnographic counterexamples, on the other.

In this introduction, I parse distinctive features of Ortner's and Robbins' respective perspectives, address their relation to theory and to ethnography, and consider the stakes involved in concretely applying their key concepts. It should be noted at the outset that the ominous 'darkness' that Dark Anthropology reflects is not universal even as it now seems prominent or pervasive in a range of Western countries, including the U.S. On the one hand, as Ortner and Robbins stress, people often configure meaningful lives of positive value in spite of their experience or perception of dark times. On the other hand, they do this, as Marx would say, under conditions that are not of their own choosing, particularly insofar as they eke out good living under conditions of inequality or domination. In understanding this relationship ethnographically, in concrete application, it seems particularly important to combine a critical understanding of local and larger political economy *with* a culturally nuanced understanding of locally constructed positive meaning, resilience, and optimism or happiness.

Papua New Guinea—the country from which all the substantive contributions in this issue derive—is particularly apt for exploring these issues, especially given Melanesia's well-documented cultural diversity amid widespread conditions of underdevelopment and of sociopolitical and economic marginality (e.g., Knauft 1999; Robbins and Wardlow 2005; Patterson and MacIntyre 2011). These considerations resonate with what Robbins (2013) characterises as experiences of the suffering subject

among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. At the same time, as he also suggests, the ability of Melanesians to configure and assert resilience and positive cultural value is enormously creative and diverse. Indeed, the poignant responses and diverse counterassertions of Melanesians in the face of political and economic marginality may be bellwethers we can learn from in considering reactions to the reality or the perception of dark times in other countries, including our own.

THEORY, CONCEPT, AND ANCESTRIES OF THE 'DARK' AND THE 'GOOD'

In recent decades, the anthropological shift from grand theory to key concept is relative if nonetheless substantial: from omnibus competing theories of ultimate causes and conditions of sociocultural life, secondarily supported by conceptual elaborations, to the elevation of key concepts as themselves a kind of self-contained perspective or *zeitgeist*. This theory-to-concept shift is reflected in the difference in tone and emphasis between Ortner's recent treatment of Dark Anthropology and her extremely influential essay thirty-two years earlier concerning 'Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties' (1984). Though a bit intricate, the contrastive titling and orientation of these articles is revealing.

Ortner notes that her recent essay (2016) is a follow-up and sequel to her earlier one, as reflected in its subtitle: 'Dark Anthropology and its Others: Theory Since the Eighties.' In the process, 'theory' moves from the title to the subtitle, and an Anthropology of the Good is not referred to in the title but flagged by negative definition: one of the alternatives or 'Others' of Dark Anthropology. There is less exposition of clearly delineated theoretical schools and greater illustration of diverse approaches that cluster loosely under 'Dark Anthropology' and others that configure under 'Anthropologies of the Good.' While Ortner's section on Dark Anthropology is theoretically informed—Marx, Foucault, Harvey, and so on—the alternatively favoured anthropology of the good is not substantively defined on its own theoretical terms. Rather, it emerges as a topical alternative, complement to, or resistance against Dark Anthropology—by means of a substantive focus on happiness, well-being, morality, and prosocial ethics.

Robbins' article, as well as Ortner's, gives much greater attention to the darker anthropology that they both appreciate and want to depart from than it does to the positive definition and theoretical delineations of the favoured anthropology of the good: the latter is topically illustrated but not theoretically delineated. In Ortner's case this stands in marked contrast to her elaborate exposition of practice theory as the crowning culmination of her earlier article. By contrast, her recent contribution refers to practice theory and to Bourdieu in passing (2016: 63) without substantively considering the legacy of practice theory *per se*.

The title of Robbins' article also defines his Anthropology of the Good in contrastive terms: 'Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good.' Of special relevance to the present collection, he assesses that 'the suffering subject' was itself preceded by anthropology's focus on what Trouillot (1991) called the savage slot, of which Melanesia is often taken as an exemplar. Robbins describes the terms of

this sequential movement—from a pre-eminent concern with ‘the savage slot’ to the ‘suffering slot’ and thence to a budding ‘anthropology of the good’—through the graphic metaphor of a moving light that sheds its illumination first on one phenomenon and then another. Robbins does not greatly consider why or how this light of attention moves over time, nor does he consider the reasons, causes, or theory of who is holding the light and by what means a new optic supplants a previous one. (One is reminded of Foucault’s [1970] treatment of major epistemic change: it simply ‘happens’, as if without explanation.) Again, this is not a criticism; such issues are not the issue or purpose of Robbins’ essay. And this, in a sense, is the point.

Viewed from a more historical and theoretical point of view, Dark Anthropology and the Anthropology of the Good have much deeper anthropological ancestries. As Ortner discusses, Dark Anthropology—and also the Anthropology of the Suffering Subject—has a clear Marxist cast, inflected latterly and importantly by Foucault. As against this, both articles suggest that the anthropology of the good is informed by greater sensitivity to diverse intricacies of cultural and subjective orientation: what Ortner earlier described with clear theoretical lineaments as symbolic anthropology (1984: 128).

Starkly stated, both Ortner and Robbins find that a Marxist and Foucauldian informed emphasis on domination and oppression has become too dominant and reductive in anthropology—Dark Anthropology, the Suffering Subject. Against this, while appreciative of its contributions, both suggest this focus needs to be complemented by greater emphasis on cultural and subjectively-oriented topics associated with an Anthropology of the Good. In the process, symbols-and-meaning anthropology becomes paired with a particular topical emphasis: features of care, wellness, ethics, morality, and happiness. This stands in contrast to earlier assertions of symbols-and-cultural meaning anthropology à la Geertz, Schneider, Dumont and others, namely, that *all* features of social life are culturally constituted and symbolically constructed, be they, as in Geertz’s essays and books, associated with economics, subsistence, religion, politics, ideology, or even common sense as a ‘cultural system’ (e.g., Geertz 1960, 1963a,b, 1973, 1975, 1981). In effect, what was previously considered a cultural theory of everything has been narrowed in topical application to that which is, by contrast and negative definition, orthogonal to more reductive Marxist and Foucauldian approaches. Explaining how people who are ‘oppressed’ nonetheless can feel ‘happy’ seems an especially cultural and symbolic question rather than a politico-economic or ideological one. And yet, as the contributions to the present issue show, *it is the relationship between these—between politico-economically structured inequality and attempts to assert positive meaning and purpose—that is one of the most productive ways to apply these concepts ethnographically.* In the absence of such a reciprocal engagement, the larger theoretical legacies that inform current concepts easily become uncritically delimited in application to just one or another delimited field of social life.

The complementary relationship between the critical objectivism of political economy and the interpretive subjectivism of symbols-and-meaning anthropology has long

been fruitful in anthropology. Indeed, this combination has provided what is possibly the strongest cutting edge of great ethnography and great conceptualisation during the last quarter century or so. It is worth reasserting in the spirit of Gramsci (1971), Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), and the early Lukacs (1972; cf. Knauff 2013) that political economy is resolutely cultural as well as ideological. Conversely, politics and economics are also fundamentally cultural formations, constructions of social facts (e.g., Weber 1958; Mauss 1966; Dumont 1974; Geertz 1981). By taking these complementary perspectives in tandem we can consider their common interface to combine a relatively more ‘political economic’ perspective with a relatively more ‘culturalist’ one. This is what the papers in this collection do, combining assessments of disempowerment or marginalisation *with* those of cultural recuperation and social wellbeing.

Though beyond the scope of this introduction to address in detail, the concepts that Ortner and Robbins foreground have deep and long ancestries in anthropology, including the zeitgeist of our field since its inception. Even during the 1830s, the Aboriginal Protection Society in England, which was a forerunner to institutional Anthropology, decried the slavery and indentured servitude of British colonialism, and worked as it could to protect and sustain what were then considered savage subjects. The well-told stories of ancestral anthropological luminaries such as Tylor, Morgan, Boas, Malinowski, Benedict, Mead, Evans-Pritchard, and many others attest to the interplay between a desire to appreciate and validate non-western Otherness—its value and goodness—vis-à-vis the oft-unstated but subtextually screaming depredations of colonialism, missionisation, capitalist trade and war. Alternative or opposed strains of anthropology have also been evident, from nineteenth century evolutionary racism to early twentieth century eugenics and ‘Darkness in El Dorado’ (Tierney 2002). But the dominant and prevailing tide in anthropology has been in the other direction.

As such, to be reductive, an emphasis of the ‘good’ among non-Western peoples who are ‘suffering’ is a longstanding anthropological emphasis, including in relation to Western depredations against them. In this respect, both Robbins’ and Ortner’s articles are a call for us to regain greater balance and re-emphasise the recuperative strains of our deeper anthropological roots.

Here, tropes of ‘dark’ and ‘light’ in relation to ‘suffering’ and what is ‘good’ bear scrutiny. The civilising enlightenment of so-called natives was a prime if not principal goal of both Christian missionisation and colonialism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The term ‘Melanesia’ by literal reference itself connoted the ‘dark islands’ replete with savagery that cried out for the benefits of whiteness (see Knauff 1990). Among the Gebusi when I first restudied them in 1998, tropes of Christian enlightenment against the evils of dark heathenism were graphically depicted and powerfully impactful for local people in evangelical conversion posters (see Figs 1,2).

Since the anthropological acceptance of Marxist influence during the 1960s, however, the light of darkness, to use Robbins’ trope, has been more explicitly redirected in Anthropology from those in the savage slot to its colonial and Christian overseers



Figure 1 The heathen dark heart of man.

and oppressors. Hence the irony that, in a reversal of nineteenth and early twentieth century projections, the ‘dark’ is now the overbearing inequity and dispossession of modern neoliberalism rather than the negative attribution of backwardness to ‘dark peoples’ themselves. Conversely, the enlightening good is now easily projected onto indigenous peoples—notwithstanding self-attributions of backwardness that can be quite pronounced among local people themselves (e.g., Errington and Gewertz 1995; Knauft 2002a,b; Knapp 2017: 232–237). This changed attribution of light versus dark is not so much an overturning of earlier anthropological sensibilities as it is a coming out of the closet, a statement in more explicit terms, of sentiments that have been influential if not foundational in Anthropology from its inception.

CAUSES AND CONDITIONS OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL PRODUCTION OF CONCEPTS

Amid the changing march of history, why are these particular contributions of Ortner and Robbins, their emphasis on Dark Anthropology, the Suffering Subject, and an Anthropology of the Good, so influential? And why are they influential *now*?

Subaltern studies paragon Gyan Pandey (pers. comm.) has suggested that all history is in important respects a history of the present. No matter how objectively, empirically, and rigorously attuned historians are to the facts, records, and archives of the past, their accounts always implicitly reflect the concerns and the perspectives of



Figure 2 The newly enlightened good heart of man.

the present, including through choice of topic and cast of interpretation. The bias of the present in history has been recognised at least since the *New Science* of Giambattista Vico in the early eighteenth century (Vico 2002), but it remains rather provocative to assert this in the face of current academic publications. The same arguably pertains to anthropology: no matter how carefully we attune to specifics of ethnographic and cultural difference, taking seriously their deep alterity, at some register our accounts, even new ones, reflect the ethnographer's home-culture or home-country interests, perspectives, and biases, including in the choice of topic and mode of presentation.

Ortner herself is attuned to this fact. The first sentence of her article (2016: 47) states that, 'Academic work, at least in the social sciences, cannot be detached from the conditions of the real world in which it takes place' (cf. also Robbins 2013: 448). She goes on to consider social developments and crises in the West, and especially in the U.S., that since the 1980s have informed the shift from what she calls culturalist perspectives to those focusing on domination and inequity. She suggests that these changes emerged amid American-led global neoliberalisation, de-industrialisation, associated accumulation by dispossession, and governmental oppression and incarceration in the U.S. itself.

If these developments explain a darkening of anthropological perspective, this darkening has, if anything, become yet more intense since the publication of these articles—Robbins' in 2013 and especially since Ortner's in 2016. Ortner's recent essay was published a good half-year *prior* to the presidential election of Donald

Trump in the U.S. and several months before the Brexit vote in the UK. Presciently, she wrote: 'the American working class [has] basically collapsed, economically and politically' (2016: 53). She lamented, 'beyond deindustrialisation... a kind of active war on the poor,' including 'a kind of contemptuous attitude toward the working classes and the poor beyond the necessity for profit' (2016: 54). In effect, she presciently put her finger on the cultural condescension and lack of respect that fuelled the resentment of Trump supporters in the 2016 American election (cf. Isenberg 2016). Subsequent research has shown the degree to which these discontents in the U.S. are not just socioeconomic but ones of threatened status, failed cultural entitlement, and exploited sexist and especially racial resentment (e.g., Cahn and Carbone 2010; Kimmel 2017; Williams 2017; Abramowitz 2018; Knauft 2018; Knowles and Tropp 2018; Schaffner *et al.* 2018; cf. Knauft n.d.). In the U.S. the flipside of neoliberalism has arguably been the masking of class conflict by the fomenting of political polarisation, xenophobia, sexism, and racism among previously privileged whites and others who are now see themselves as left behind.

In the wake of Trump's election subsequent events in Europe and elsewhere, as well as in the U.S., reflect what has been called 'The Great Regression' (Geiselberger 2017), and what Bauman (2017) has termed 'Retrotopia' (see Knauft 2018). In this context, the perception and salience of 'Darkness' in Western white-dominant countries has palpably grown. In reaction, the perception of dark times has also grown among American liberal and progressive intellectual class-segments, including anthropologists. It is hence neither far-fetched nor unappreciative to suggest that the influence of Robbins' and Ortner's respective contributions, and especially Ortner's, has been increased by events in Western countries since their publication. Conversely, there is a distinct sense that their accounts are especially interesting and valuable insofar as they have understood and delineated larger trends and alternatives ahead of the general Western curve of social and cultural perception.

In a global context, it is important to register that 'darkness' is not uniformly shared, and that the concepts under consideration vary greatly in different world areas and countries. Even in the U.S. at the time of present writing, the veil of political polarisation and social darkness persists amid a booming economy, low unemployment, and reduced taxes. (The oligarchs, at least, should be quite happy.) In larger purview, as Laidlaw (2016: 18) has noted, Dark Anthropology tends to neglect trends such as global reduction of child and adult mortality and morbidity, illiteracy, absolute poverty, child labor, and formalised political autocracy. Indeed, a range of research suggests that along a bevy of salient indicators social life in Western countries and in the world generally is, if anything, *better* than ever (e.g., Norberg 2017; Pinker 2018; Rosling 2018). As Ortner herself notes (2016: 48, 65) there is hence a distinct risk of nationalist bias in Americanist projections of the 'dark' to other places as well as to itself. Conversely, there is a risk, particularly in the Anglo-American perception of Robbins' and Ortner's contributions, that despite their own culminating emphasis on the culturally recuperative, tropes of the Dark and the Suffering will continue to trump those of the Good. As such, it can be important to re-emphasise the

culminating positive focus of Robbins' and Ortner's respective essays. This is done in various ways in almost all the contributions to the present special issue.

Ethnographic application

Despite extensive published discussion of Ortner's (2016) and Robbins' (2013) articles, there has been less attempt to ethnographically apply their concepts than to engage them in general conceptual debate. This is perhaps not surprising—as opposed to systematic theoretical application, the increasing tendency has been for ethnographic authors to forage across a spectrum of disparate concepts to illuminate specific social and cultural conditions rather than privileging a single mega-conceptual emphasis.

An immediate issue that arises, as it does in almost any conceptual application to ethnographic specifics, is whose notions of 'suffering' or 'good,' for instance, are being used? Are we talking about concepts defined and employed universally? Or are we charged to assess peoples' own notions and attributions of 'suffering' and 'good' based on local cultural perspectives? Are our concepts to be used as glosses for 'emic' notions of felt and attributed suffering or goodness, or are they 'etic' analytic projections or impositions?

One of Robbins' important points is that 'suffering,' at least, seems to be widely if not universally understandable and identifiable. He quotes Fassin and Rechtman's book *The Empire of Trauma* (2009: 23) to the effect that: 'the human being suffering from trauma [becomes] the very embodiment of our common humanity' (Robbins 2013: 453). In discussing Daniels' 1996 well-known article, 'Crushed Glass, Or Is There a Counterpoint to Culture?' he writes: 'Let us accept for present purposes that traumatic suffering may be truly beyond culture... This is a way of writing ethnography in which we do not primarily provide the cultural context so as to offer lessons in how lives are lived differently elsewhere, but in which we offer accounts of trauma that make us and our readers feel in our bones the vulnerability we as human beings all share' (Robbins 2013: 455). He goes on to say that: 'Premised on the universality of trauma and the equal right all human beings possess to be free of its effects, suffering slot ethnography is secure in its knowledge of good and evil and works toward achieving progress in the direction of its already widely accepted models of the good' (Robbins 2013: 456).

On the one hand this emphasis on what is often termed precarity becomes something of a shared human spectre, a condition of human existence itself (see Han 2018; cf. Agamben 1998). Indeed, though not Robbins' point, understanding and accepting the reality and pervasiveness of human suffering is considered the first universal principle for religions such as Buddhism. On the other hand, there is a clear complementary figure-ground relation here between what is suffering and what is good. Put more strongly, the good is easily seen not in its own clearly defined terms (either emic or etic) so much it emerges as the opposite of suffering and victimisation, against which it emerges in negative definition (contrast Laidlaw 2014). As discussed above, this is evident in the structure and content of both Ortner's and Robbins' articles. Insofar as

suffering is taken as universal, assumptions of what is or should be good can all-the-more-easily be smuggled in as its complement, as if they, too, were natural and universal. Robbins segues this problem to his alternative view that the 'good' should not be considered universally but rather on its own cultural terms. But the problem of application still remains: what is the relationship, what is the slippage, and what are the stakes between 'their' views of what is good (or what is suffering), and the anthropologist's own views or imputations?

This point can be driven home though an analogy that, to many liberal Western readers, may seem unseemly—and that in a sense is the point. The Chinese Communist and originally Maoist castigation and enmity against the Dalai Lama—accompanied by the brutal suppression of Tibetan Buddhism—were arguably based on the Chinese belief that the Dalai Lama and his cultural system were themselves oppressing the Tibetan peasantry. Maoists believed this occurred through ideological obfuscation that used religion to shield the elite system of Tibetan feudal control from being exposed. For Chinese, this occlusion was legitimated and reinforced through Tibetans' blind faith devotion to the Dalai Lama himself. As Tibetans have remained committed to the Dalai Lama despite conditions of suppression, surveillance, and duress, their devotion has remained culturally illegible to Chinese, whose enmity against the Dalai Lama has been unyielding. Compare this to the contemporary liberal disparagement of Trump and his supporters in the U.S. Trump stands accused of brutally suppressing the interests of lower-class Americans by defunding government support programs while providing windfall benefits for the wealthy that occlude ultra-wealthy class interests. This is thought to be accomplished through ideological obfuscation that leads white lower-class Americans to believe that Trump is their political saviour. Hence, the greater the evidence marshalled against Trump, the more iron-clad the devotion of his followers can seem to be—and the more incomprehensible it becomes, being culturally illegible to the American cultural elite.

From a liberal progressivist point of view, the huge difference between these cases is, of course, that Chinese fomented a virulent genocide against Tibetan Buddhists and their religion, rendering Chinese actions morally heinous and reprehensible. In diametric contrast, Democrats are trying to save poor white and underclass Americans from the depredations of Trump and the damage he is inflicting on them and the rest of the country. Accordingly, though disaffected whites and others may vote for Trump against their own self-interest, political economic leadership needs to be changed for their own benefit over and against their will. But if for sake of argument and demonstration we take the core cultural parallelism between these two cases at its raw face value, the same kind of argument was made by Chinese Maoists of the 1950s and 1960s and by Chinese Communists since.

The point is that if one takes a value-*neutral* view of cultural value itself, following Max Weber (1978) as transmuted into cultural anthropology via Geertz and others, the difference between anti-Dalai Lama Maoists and anti-Trump Democrats blurs if not disappears. This is *not* to say that anthropologists should not have political commitments and support views and actions that support their sense of progressivist

ethics: for instance, vehemently opposing Chinese occupation of Tibet and vehemently opposing Trump. The point is rather that the source of these views cannot be generated or justified by cultural relativism itself (any more, in different register, than ethical and moral commitments can be generated through value-neutral science).

This is all a dramatised way of illustrating, as I've suggested at greater length elsewhere, that deep cultural relativism and deep critical understanding of political economy need to be employed in tandem, both to provide broader perspective and to provide a check and balance on each other's excesses (Knauff 1996: ch. 2). Though their differences are in a sense irreducible, the complementarity of these respective optics becomes all the more vital to maintain both for our intellectual understanding and for our ethical and moral commitments. In the present more topically delimited context, this means we need both a Dark Anthropology and an Anthropology of the Good. There may not be a litmus test or recipe for their exact combination in specific cases. But a commitment to considering the reciprocal importance of each needs to be cultivated, notwithstanding and indeed just because of their antinomy. This is a pragmatic issue, not simply a logical one. Attempting to trump and overwhelm one of these perspectives in favour of the other is, to my mind, a mistake. In the present context, this addresses and to some degree resolves in *practical* terms the strong argument of Laidlaw (2016) against Ortner's treatment of Dark Anthropology and the Anthropology of the Good: that an emphasis on and commitment to an Anthropology of the Good undercuts, overwhelms, and ultimately obliterates the understandings and orientations of Dark Anthropology—that you can't have it both ways.

The contributions of the present special issue cannot solve this problem, but they address it clearly in ethnographic terms. Put more concretely, we examine the relationship between suffering and the good to refine our understanding across them. Importantly, this means looking at both sides of the emic/etic coin: both local views of darkness or of goodness, and our own. This combined approach heightens both the nuances of local attribution *and* our understanding of the assumptions and appropriate limit points of our conceptual attributions. By this means contributors to this issue show that the apparent conceptual weakness of 'the dark,' 'the suffering subject,' and 'the good' as hazily defined concepts is actually useful in allowing their specific relationship, both in local and in analytic terms, to be parsed apart and productively refined in specific ethnographic cases. This affords greater nuance of local understanding, greater critical purchase, and greater nuance of understanding concerning our own categories of analysis.

Absent such application, the gap between analytic projection and ethnographic validation is easily occluded as we move from 'theory-driven' to 'concept-driven' anthropology. Unlike the Weberian separation of analytic ideal-types from the complexity of social and cultural reality (e.g., Weber 2004: 387–99), it is presently all-too-easy to assume that analytic concepts and ethnographic realities are one and the same. This is not a 'resolvable' issue but one to be explicitly aware of and attended to in conceptually-driven anthropology. Ideally, as explored in our contributions, there is an

interactive or even dialectical relationship between the projection of analytic concepts and their progressive refinement vis-à-vis ethnographic specifics.

MELANESIA: FROM THE SAVAGE SLOT TO THE SUFFERING SLOT TO THE GOOD?

The above issues have distinct implications in the context of hinterland Melanesia. As mentioned in general further above, concepts such as the savage slot, the suffering slot, and the good have different valence and purchase in different world and local areas, depending on the particular history of neoliberalism, capitalism, and abjection as well as on cultural, social, and political responses. At least in relative terms, hinterland Melanesia was for most of the twentieth century highly marginalised and peripheral to the workings of global political economy (e.g., Brookfield 1971; cf. Robbins and Wardlow 2005). In complementary fashion, for a twentieth century anthropology interested especially in the enduring cultures and customs of non-Western peoples, Melanesia was often considered important or even central as an ethnographic world area.

Both amid and despite the disavowal if not complete overturning of the savage slot in the more contemporary anthropology of Melanesia, the politico-economic marginality of Melanesians has continued, and has been deeply felt and importantly responded to almost throughout the region (e.g., Patterson and MacIntyre 2011). Melanesians often perceive themselves to be left behind in the race to become modern, to be suffering and disempowered. In political economic terms—despite and to a significant degree *because* of the impact of commoditisation, world religions, NGOs, and multinational extraction of mineral or petroleum resources—the perception is common if not general in Melanesia that development of health services, education, security, business, and infrastructure are minimal if not effectively absent, especially in rural areas. Under such conditions, and in the absence of viable local economic development, the very features of intense corporate or governmental intrusion that are taken to task in Dark Anthropology are desired and longed for by local people themselves (e.g., Dwyer and Minnegal 1998).

The workings of power, domination, and the suffering of subjects here carry distinctive characteristics that return us in a newly creative key to anthropology's long-standing concern with how politics, stigma, prestige, and inequity are produced and responded to in marginalised areas of developing countries. This includes not just the formal workings of status or wealth but the cultural and moral dimensions of value that inform local reactions and responses: on the one hand, to introduced commoditisation, religion, and highly uneven extractive resource development, and, on the other, to the proliferation, intensification, or rejuvenation of longer-standing cultural orientations. These, in turn, often include recuperative and prosocial dimensions of cultural life that resonate with an 'Anthropology of the Good.'

The present collection of articles considers these issues in ways that circumvent and surpass reductionist projections that divide and oppose emic and etic points of

view, on one hand, or that assume a simple shift of emphasis from a previous optic—the savage slot or the suffering subject—to a new one, such as the recuperation of the cultural good. In the mix the papers go beyond lingering debates in anthropology concerning the transformation versus continuation or reproduction of cultural orientations, neither reducing these to a residuum of introduced factors or forces, nor elevating them to a reflex of longstanding customs or values. The contributions articulate with received areas of longstanding anthropological interest, including gender and sexuality; conflict, violence, and warfare; social organisation, production, and exchange; leadership and prestige; and colonial-cum-postcolonial dynamics of representation. In each case, these dynamics engage the experience of and response to precarity in the context of compromised modern development (cf. Knauff 2002a).

The five papers in this collection consider these issues across a large range of variation in Papua New Guinea, including:

- The appropriation and recasting of primitivist stereotypes of the peoples of Highland of Papua New Guinea in a 1950s Papuan-run mission school newspaper (Ryan Schram)
- The impact and appropriation of intense violence and warfare in the wake of failed development (Jerry Jacka)
- Recuperative assertions of independence and value among women who have contracted HIV (Holly Wardlow)
- The assertion of cultural ‘greatness’ among a remote and economically left-behind group that reinscribes longstanding values through new avenues of social and material expression (Anne-Sylvie Malbrancke)
- Construction of a cultural economy of labour and money among a highly remote and marginalised people who have extremely little wage labor or cash economy (Bruce Knauff)

Collectively the contributions attest not only to the rich Melanesian diversity of local responses to sociopolitical and economic marginality, but also to the elaborate ways that received cultural resources are drawn upon and developed under conditions of compromised modern development. In this sense, the goal is not to show whether one or another key concept truly applies ethnographically but to use conceptualisations—the assessment of dark times, the suffering subject, recuperative values of the good—as tools to think with, to help analyse and parse ethnographic and cultural specifics.

At larger issue are the terms, conditions, and assumptions entailed by conceptual designations and imputations in relation to both objective conditions and peoples’ understanding and values in response to these. The broader aim is neither to universalise one or another conceptual application nor to debunk their comparative relevance but to expose and develop more penetrating insights into both the people studied and the concepts applied. This important process is iterative and destined to

be repeated, including as ‘the light moves on’ to other new concepts and applications over time.

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