

Dark Anthropology and the Revenge of the Suffering Subject --  
in America and Elsewhere

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Prologue

Writing about things reflectively and theoretically as they develop in real political time makes work something of an infinitely evolving and extendable endeavor. Against this, one somehow feels a commitment when seeing history flash as if before your eyes, with ghosts of a medieval past coming back in ways you didn't think possible. When Benjamin's Angel of Progress, with her back rushing toward the future, looks in front of her, which is really behind, to see the detritus of so-called civilization receding from her feet. At that moment, it's time to write. Even if flawed or a bit syncopated at times. At least in the sense of a narrative structure that attempts to weave across and among different registers of representation and not, as it were, trying to encompass them within one theoretical umbrella. This to be distinguished from hyper-relativity or hyper-self-awareness in writing and in representation, which does not concern me here. So no more on that now.

Putting the shock back into culture

We anthropologists sometimes warn our students about reverse culture shock – that weird out-of-placeness, that uncanny strangeness, that we feel when

coming back to our home country. For most American cultural anthropologists, this means coming back to the U.S. after an extended time living in some very different part of the world, in a very different world of fieldwork. Over years of repeated excursions, however, this sense of strangeness upon so-called homecoming typically reduces if not disappears. And now that digital ties reach practically everywhere across the world, the divide between field and home can shrink so much that the divide can seem, at least for some, to almost vanish.

But last year in 2017, my extended fieldwork in the Papua New Guinea rainforest had me really off the grid – no internet, no phone, no roads to anywhere, and the nearest airstrip closed. At the time, this seemed just as it should be. I was experiencing and studying what it was like for a remote tribal people, the Gebusi, to accommodate, adapt, and respond to their isolation and marginality amid the dashed hopes of their previous developments -- the crashing and burning of their own locally failed modernity.

In strange parallel, the U.S. I had left was in its own quandry of feeling the rug pulled out from under -- of not knowing the way forward, of feeling lost in a sense of backsliding, of losing some vague and yet deep aspiration for progress amid the election of Donald Trump and its aftermath. It seemed to be a nightmare that wouldn't end, at least for that swath of so-called liberal or progressive America that I vaguely identified with, my friends, colleagues, and family. Indeed, against the America that I had left, Gebusi actually emerged as something of a cultural teacher. They had developed ingenious and remarkable ways to find meaning and richness in their left-behindness. Gebusi adults now manage an average cash income of less than 20 cents per day. Their commercial economy has collapsed for more than a decade and shows no sign at all of recovering. And yet, they are doing very well, thank you very much. That is a different story, one we'll come back to later.

But against the resilience of Gebusi, so far away and so far down the food chain, what was happening back in the U.S. in the late spring and summer of last year – and, I might add, yet more and worse since then? Trump had been elected, yes, but his survival at that time seemed very much in doubt. Would there be

heavy summertime Congressional hearings, reminiscent of Watergate or Ollie North and Iran-Contra or Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas? Would Trump already be impeached by the time I returned? Would there be massive protests, the rise of social movements, the chaos of imminent change of regime? Like an anthropologist heading back to the field, I returned to the U.S. with pores open to absorb and understand what had happened in my absence.

I emerged, then, from the heat and sweat and isolation of the rainforest to find a different kind of shock. As on election night, I quickly went from hope to despair, with all answers negative. Trump's banality of power had not only not waned, it was riding higher and higher. Among Republicans, his support was between 80 and 90 percent – a pattern that continues to the present. I was amazed to find lies-as-truth on Fox News. I discovered that Sean Hannity's TV and talk radio shows had gained the largest following in the country. So I viewed and listened in, as if in a foreign world. Hannity was actively propagating the prospect of armed citizen warfare, with real guns, certainly as many and as high-powered as possible, against any and all civil, legal, or political attempts to oppose Trump. Before his election, I had felt sure that George W would be the worst American President during my lifetime, by far. How could I have been so wrong and so at sea, even back in my own country?

More than that, I came across partisanship I had never experienced during the days of Ronald Reagan or even "W" Bush, Bush the Lesser. Now there was something new about political identity, about "feeling" Blue (in both senses) -- and discovering in shock that some people in my larger network were Red, Republican. Such terms had always seemed foreign to me personally. (Being Red was something quite different back at Yale in the 1970's - Communist!) As an eager aficionado of peoples afar and a general critic of those at home, I had never felt that much bond or affiliation with the U.S. as a nation (even though I did think that Obama was on the whole as good as could a President as could ever have be realistically hoped for). But now things seemed really at stake in this thing now called "in my own country": I identified as if for the first time, albeit oppositionally, as an American. My previously unmarked nationality, my previously unmarked race – working in the field as a speck of white among black

and brown people in Africa, Asia, and Oceania -- my previously unmarked politics were somehow now very marked and reinforced as core features of my personal identity. I suddenly and ashamedly felt very white, very American, very rich, very highly educated, and certainly and suddenly very Blue. As if on my other side, amid #Metoo as the antithesis of Trump, I was also newly male and, as a senior professor, both dangerously powerful and open to critique on that account as if by fiat. Even if I resisted, critiqued, or laughed off any of the above labels, I had the subtle feeling that others perceived me a bit more categorically. I was either "one of us" by virtue of shared affiliation, or an outsider, *not* one of us, in newly visceral ways.

This given, it was all the more disconcerting when these categories of heightened opposition came into social contact or conflict in the rounds of my American life. There was the angst of a colleague who felt she had to sever contact with family members who supported Trump; the awkwardness of a dinner party after we found that the hosts were alt-Right supporters; the laments of a widowed friend who had been brought up short on eHarmony after finding good dates who were nevertheless convinced that CNN rather than FOX was the wellspring of national lies and conspiracy – a conspiracy against rather than by Trump himself. (She found herself asking the political ID of dating prospects before even agreeing to meet them for coffee.) All this was kind of unprecedented in the previous half-century of life since childhood in the U.S. Daily news, conversations, and intellectual inquiry all pointed to polarization, to reification, to the intensification and congealing of identity, the hardening of categories that had been less strongly marked and visceral before.

Political scientists say that on a wide variety of measures, political polarization is now greater in the U.S. than it has ever been before in our lifetimes -- for well over a century, since the wake of the Civil War (e.g., Abramowitz 2018, Mason 2018, and McAdam and Kloos 2014.) Indeed, polarization between parties is so strong that it is now described as simply *negative* partisanship: antipathy to the other party is so high that one would rather change ones views entirely than contemplate any agreement with the other side (Abramowitz 2018:ch. 7). Political opposition becomes its own end -- the goal of winner-take-all for its

own sake, beyond the content of the issues involved. Under such conditions, it is of course practically impossible to reach mutual agreement through compromise -- or even through capitulation. Though political scientists try to make their work as empirical and politically neutral as possible, they are now ringing real alarm bells at deepening threat that negative partisanship poses to the U.S. national fabric, with little prospect of lessening or loosening up.

I realized that what I myself had been experiencing was the lived reality of this polarization as it filtered into daily crevices of my American life. In the mix, I realized that negative partisanship insinuated socially into a sense of *identity* by negative definition: identities of race, gender, sex, nationality, and so on defined increasingly not so much by what they *were*, but negatively, in contrast to what they were *not*.

I had never before felt my sense of identity and affiliation influenced much less determined by the news channels I watched, as opposed to those that I just couldn't stomach.

If I could even dimly feel this change from my position of secure privilege on just about every important axis of inequality, I could only imagine how much deeper these issues were likely to be among those who had already felt viscerally marked or scarred by their identity, be it black, poor, poor white, gay, immigrant, deep Red, and so on. I recalled by contrast how really hard I had found it just a scant few years before to convey to my undergraduates in introduction to Anthropology that the political was actually an aspect or dimension of many things, it wasn't just a segmented part of society or culture that came out of the closet only briefly, in alternate Novembers, attempting to shake voters out of their bored yawns -- politics, yeah, whatever . . . How much now that all seems to have changed.

## Anthropology

I remember the big session at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Minneapolis a few weeks after the 2016 election.

No one could even begin to answer the question of why and how a majority of American white women could have voted for Trump over Clinton (see Rogers 2016). I remember thinking that if American anthropologists, us champions of the victimized and downtrodden across the world, *had* really known what was going on in our own country, *had* really felt and understood the deep pain, suffering, and sense of crisis among Trump supporters, that the election would not have been a surprise. Yet more, if the pollsters and pundits and Democratic funders had been made aware of these sensibilities ahead of time, the electoral outcome in states like Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania would likely have been much different. Along with Hillary's team and the general left-leaning electorate, American anthropologists, had been, in hindsight, encased in a huge collective myopia.

I suspect that ethnographers such as Kathleen Stewart, who worked in Appalachia (*A Space on the Side of the Road*, 1996) were not so surprised. Certainly not surprised were scholars like J.D. Vance (*Hillbilly Elegy*, 2016) or anthropologist-cum-journalist Sarah Kendzior, who presaged Trump's victory in viral blog posts since congealed in her book *The View from Flyover Country* (2015/2018), or Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in their Own Land* (2016). In early 2016 well before the election, or even Brexit, anthropological luminary Sherry Ortner talked about "Dark Anthropology." She wrote that "the American working class [has] basically collapsed, economically and politically" (2016:53). She lamented "beyond deindustrialization . . . 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" (ibid.). In effect, she presciently put her finger on the cultural condescension and lack of respect that fueled Trump's lower middle class vengeful supporters. However, the trend that she and Joel Robbins (2013) have seen in anthropology – an acute sensitivity and concern with the victimization and suffering of others – what she called Dark Anthropology -- did not expand to adequately include plight of subaltern whites within the U.S. itself. Nor did the groundswell push for engaged anthropology in our discipline – the imperative for anthropologists to not just intellectually address but practically engage the acute human problems of those who are

victimized. Working primarily abroad, I am also on this hook, also part of the problem.

Almost by definition, anthropologists are part of the progressive and educated cultural elite. And if and when we are not – and many of us aspire not to be -- we are increasingly viewed this way in the eyes of others. And, politically if not now also socially, we are overwhelmingly *Blue*. This does not go unnoticed. In 2011, Rick Scott, the Republican Governor of Florida opined that, “We don’t need a lot more anthropologists in the state...we don’t need them here” (*Neuroanthropology* 2011). More generally, a recent PEW pool has found that a whopping 58% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents believe that college education has an overall *negative* impact in America (Fingerhut 2017).

Despite or perhaps because of our liberalism, it is not hard to see hard why it’s tough for us anthropologists to appreciate, empathize with, and understand the plight of those – white, Christian, longstanding American -- who feel entitled and yet so left behind in the U.S. This especially as there is now increasingly strong empirical confirmation that being a Trump supporter in 2016 was directly and powerfully correlated with all of the following (see for example Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018):

- Racism, including denial that race discrimination is important or significant in the U.S.
- Sexism, including the idea that women are too easily offended, are seeking special favors under guises of “equality,” seek power by gaining control over men, and complain about discrimination when they lose to men in fair competition.
- Opposition to cultural diversity, including antipathy to immigrants
- Anti-intellectualism, including opposition to the influence of higher education
- Opposition to government programs, viewed as “welfare,” to help the poor

- Belief that same-sex relations are morally wrong and should be legally restricted
- Favoring earlier marriage and higher fertility instead of going to or completing College
- Opposing a woman's right to choose to have an abortion

Against these views, we anthropologists emphasize if not canonize the importance of relativism, of respecting and championing cultural diversity, of fighting against racial, gendered, and sexual discrimination, and of collectively helping those who are victimized, disenfranchised, or impoverished. We cherish the critical intellectualism that documents, exposes, and publicizes oppression and prejudice. And we increasingly attempt, however we can, to connect such critique with constructive ways to support the needs and aspirations of those who are disadvantaged, oppressed, and less fortunate.

So how can we extend this same sincerity and commitment to Americans who feel powerfully oppressed, left behind, and disparaged by our own liberal Left elite? This includes, by implication, ourselves, along with any government that would support our agenda.

Clearly we need a different way of viewing and framing the problem itself. Just for starters, we can note that to reify Trump supporters as a single lumped category in opposition to a "liberal Left elite" much less "anthropologists" is to employ the very strategy of opposition between large categories of lumped identity that we might want to mitigate or defuse.

#### Modernity, Suffering, and the Revenge of the Left Behind

- Class
- Sex & Gender
- Race
- Government
- Gigged
- Algorithms, Bots, and the Attentional Economy



- Marx
- Foucault

When and how will we see the end of the global cultural zeitgeist of modernity itself? That is the larger question. That is the question that should subsume that of so-called Late Capitalism, as if Capitalism as we know it, notwithstanding all the brilliant insights of Marx about its working, will somehow be overturned by some kind of political revolution. Not going to happen. Instead we might look, culturally, at our ingrained modern notions of unidirectional progress, of their relation to the modern nation-state and its global system, which arose in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century and shows now signs of crumbling or even cracking, not even changes in national borders in countries like Iraq, Syria, Congo, or Zimbabwe. What *links* modernity and the nation-state system is that lingering global cultural value of modernity, that faith in the future that undergirds both liberal progressivist values and also, as their complement, the revenge of the suffering subject, the previously deserving subject who increasingly resents being now increasingly left behind? Everyone wants progress, believes they have a right to progress, believes that economic progress and betterment should be theirs -- and all the more so if it's not. Ask all those African refugees stuck along the coast of North Africa who willingly and regularly risk their lives to find something hopefully better, in Europe.

But to address this in the U.S. itself, we need to consider the American postcolony.

In some ways, what we now see are the geopolitics of third world failure and resistance, however twisted, among the attempted and failed bourgeoisie, the failing middle class, within the U.S. itself. This, most ironically, when the U.S. economy is in general terms booming, unemployment at a historic low, interest rates minimal, the stock market high from a decade-long bull market, and a huge if extremely unwise federal tax cut. And yet, in regimes of modernity and progress, of expectations of infinite improvement among those who consider themselves most *American*, times seem rough, particularly among those who are not in the cultural and liberal elite, not in the modern bourgeoisie.

Many parts of rural and undereducated America now experience life under liberalism as their own “Desert of the Real” (Zizek 2002): deeply felt economic despair, cultural abjection, and political meaninglessness (e.g., Kendzior 2015/18, cf., Hochschild 2016). Are these now so deeply inscribed and stoked as *ressentiment* as to be reminiscent of the paranoid desperation experienced so poignantly in 1930s socialist Germany? No, if anything, they may be a bit closer to Mussolini’s fascism in Italy. Pushing yet further, what if any similarities are there, amid huge differences, to the despondency of the world’s bottom billion – and the anti-establishment revolts of the wretched of the earth (Colier 2008; Fanon 1968)? Not a chance!

The very point here is *not* to equate the economic plight of left-behind Americans with those who are truly immiserated in so many developing countries – not to occlude chasms of difference in privilege, wealth, and prosperity. The so-called poverty level in the U.S. is an individual annual income of \$12,060 – as opposed to those many in the world’s poorest countries who earn less than two dollars or even one dollar a day. The point is rather to underscore that oppression is importantly a *felt* and *perceived* condition; it is importantly even though not exclusively cultural and psychological.

The subaltern middle class that subaltern studies luminary Gyan Pandey (2015) finds operative among both African Americans and Indian *dalits* in south Asia also seems applicable in some ways to rural white Trump supporters, including just how and why in a neo-liberal world “the cultural and class markers of the subordinated . . . have been particularly difficult to shed” (ibid:340). This selective similarity to the subaltern in the white wannabe U.S. is poignant even though and perhaps just because the reactions and politics of underprivileged American whites have become so warped and regressive (compare also afflicted *dalit* politics in some parts of India).

At issue is whether and how the threads of modest *privilege* amid *relative* deprivation beg *ressentiment* that is or can be driven to deeper and more pernicious levels of reactionary lashing out. We can consider, then, how the risks

of the empowered subaltern rebound and are co-opted so regressively in the world's most powerful superpower – Achille Mbembe's (2001) African postcolony come home to roost in the heart of the hegemon. At a minimum, there seem selective resonances between capital inequalities *within* the US and the spatial geography of inequity internationally and globally -- complementary sides of Capital Difference, ala David Harvey (e.g., 2006, 2017). The migratory revenge of Africa and the mid-East against the European bourgeois, and the European lower-class revenge against its own bourgeoisie, finds selective if warped counterpart in the revenge and now political dominance of those of previously privilege who now feel left behind in the U.S.

Modernity is dead, long live modernity

Given the indeterminacy of eventful specifics, a larger view is warranted. This can lead us to reconsider in a new key the *zeitgeist* of our broader epistemic regime, the *longue durée* of its continuity beyond fanciful diagnoses or tactics for its presumed end or transformation. Such awareness was one of Foucault's most important and enduring contributions. In our present circumstance, it is hard to avoid or ignore the power of opposition between humanist and anti-humanist modernism. Yet both of these seem unable to give up tropes of ultimate or deeper or greater progress against which the present is hopelessly unfulfilled – whether due to retrograde rightist politics, on the one hand, or liberal leftist pandering, on the other.

Beyond this, Foucault might ask how the current political tumult and its progressivist opposition *both* draw upon a bedrock faith in the entitlements of modernity – that we all deserve not just the right to *pursue* happiness but the right to *be* happy, to have a continually better, more developed, and more actualized future. As if having favorable conditions that actually bring about personal happiness are themselves a core political right. This is arguably the precondition for the retro-regressive tendency to move backward through divisiveness, to seek forward glory by refraction from an imagined perfect past by debunking the present. What Zygmunt Bauman (2017) called *Retrotopia*, or what has otherwise been called *The Great Regression* (Geiselberger 2017). In

the mix, one finds an inability to give up the entitlements of continual betterment despite and even because of their experienced absence and seemingly hopeless future.

Everyone happy, and happier all the time. Stepping back, how, even in God's Christian name, could we ever expect such an odd and frankly irrational system of cultural value – with all its accumulated capitalist political power – to become an actual reality, much less save us from the existential dilemmas of being human? In the U.S., at least, a major revision to Max Weber's *zeitgeist* of capitalism in relation to current Protestant ethics seems sorely needed (cf., Weber 1958). No amount of economic growth, no reduction of unemployment and underemployment, can ever topple such a curse of value; we will always be hopelessly deprived against our inflated holy grail of capital desire. In social terms, we will always be impoverished, in *relative* deprivation, against those who are richer and better off. Conversely, we may always be vulnerable to regressive co-optation, the stoked *ressentiment* that is all the deeper and more pernicious because it can never be ameliorated, much less contravened, by objective improvements in empirical or economic terms. (In fact, there now a whole raft of books -- from Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now* (2018) to Norberg's *Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future* (2017) to Rosling's *(Factfulness:...Why Things are Better than You Think* (2018) -- that document in many *objective* ways, life on this planet is better than it's even been before – in term of overall longevity, health, social services, lowered violence, progressive education and economic life-chances, when viewed against any reasonable world-historical perspective. But that, somehow, is not and simply cannot be the point, which is a cultural and psychological one of *relative* disempowerment, *relative* deprivation, against the yet higher standards that we all, and, even increasingly across the globe, somehow feel entitled to. Modernity.

Against our entitlement to a continually better future, we arguably now have at once opposite and contradictory tendencies. On one hand is the deepening sense of crisis and failure in our very ideals of modern progress, in the U.S., the crumbling of the vaunted American dream. And yet on the other is the doubling down of just such inflated aspirations, a refusal, an almost existential or

ontological refusal, to give up the dreams and hopes and expectations of future betterment – including and especially in the face of things such as global warming and climate change, political and demographic threat, the large-scale future prospect of the loss of meaningful work in a fully automated gig economy. We have yet to approach much less accept the inescapable and ultimate failure of modernity as a global cultural system, much as it may be crumbling around us. We still desire the modern after the modern, even as it gets less and less plausible beyond any present horizon of expectation or knowability. Maybe *this* is what now links rather than divides us all -- the expectation of endless improvement and betterment that can neither be actualized nor given up, either by liberals or conservatives, either by those of us in the degraded cultural elite or by the oligarchs and underclass of less well-educated, poorer, rural, and generally discontented white and white-associated Americans.

#### Anthropology Redux – A Melanesian Answer?

How do people who are left behind in the drive to obtain money and commodities react when their hopes are dashed, when their attempts to attain a more developed, modern lifestyle are blocked? This question seems germane not just among lower-middle class Americans (or Europeans -- or Brazilians or Turks) but among peoples in geographically remote areas of developing countries such as Papua New Guinea, rural regions far from centers of power, prestige, and large-scale money and commerce. In many such areas, government presence is minimal or even nonexistent, cash economy is paltry, transportation to and communication with other areas is difficult and arduous, and, yet, awareness of and desire for economic advancement push forward.

Amid drumbeat assessments of an increasingly globalized and interconnected world (e.g., Friedman 2006; Appadurai 1996), it is easy to forget how spotty, idiosyncratic, and uneven economic development continues to be (e.g., Ferguson 2005, 2006). Yet, even in highly marginalized if not impossible conditions, the drive for upward mobility is often strong if not seemingly obsessive, fueled by painful and heightened self-awareness of being left behind.

(As an aside, I've myself experienced such powerful local and national sentiments in my project work in countries recovering from civil war or traumatic political transition. The huge belief and faith in forward moving *progress* following civil war or civil calamity was enormously and almost uniformly palpable in my experience with local people across countries such as Liberia, DRC Congo, Myanmar, Mongolia, and even in earlier years, Estonia.)

In remote rural areas, such challenges throw into distinctive relief Sherry Ortner's (2016a) conceptualization of Dark Anthropology and Joel Robbins' (2013) characterization of the Anthropology of Suffering Subjects. Both of these important contributions conclude that for the past few decades, Anthropology has emphasized conditions of human oppression, including especially as caused by rapacious capitalism and state intrusion. Both also agree that concern with this oppression and suffering have become dominant at least in American Anthropology since the 1980s – an emphasis Ortner calls Dark Anthropology. In this view, Dark Anthropology superseded and replaced Anthropology's prior dominant interest in marginalized peoples on their own terms, what Trouillot (1991) called Anthropology's fascination with the "savage slot" – our previous preoccupation with the so-called primitive.

Amid enormous variations of response and coping mechanism, people in rural areas of developing countries often have a distinctive place, including in relation to dark anthropology and/or the anthropology of suffering subjects. Rather than resisting or rebelling against modern disempowerments – capitalist expropriation, elitist inequity, governmental oppression, growing labor competition and low wages – peoples in remote areas frequently want *more* of the very features that anthropologists critique and that people elsewhere may reject: more government intrusion, more expropriation of local natural resources, more business and corporate presence -- even if the share of benefits that local people receive from these developments is incredibly small (e.g., Dwyer and Minnegal 1999; Minnegal and Dwyer 2017).

Failing this, remote and marginalized peoples are typically left or pushed back on their own. At least in relative terms, and sometimes absolutely, they are off

the grid -- and politically and economically dispensable. Even in terms of protest or resistance, their leverage has historically been limited. Over time, perhaps for decades or longer, their responses take shape, distill, and evolve in self-reliance, largely on their own. This provides special opportunity for research and empathic understanding: How people cope and create proactive responses to compromised development and dashed hopes of becoming more modern.

If failure of development is a social, economic, and political process, the crushing of modern *hopes* – hope of a local modernity -- is a crisis of embraced value and expectation, a crisis of culture and cultural psychology. Modernity here refers to a contemporary view of time as an arrow of progress, a non-traditional sense that the future should be not just different from but better than the past (see Koselleck 2004; cf., Knauff 2002b). Modernity betokens an expectation of temporal improvement, of advancing development in material terms, to be sure, but with a deep cultural value of progressive emergence and improvement. Though the intellectual critique of modernity is well advanced, including in relation to multiple or alternative modernities (e.g., Jameson 1991; Mitchell 2002; Trouillot 2002), in practical terms, desire for improvement and expectation of economic advancement have become if anything stronger than ever, including across developing as well as developed nations. There is hardly a country anywhere that now lacks a committed plan for economic development and social progress – a path to a better future. Indeed, such sentiments can be so pervasive and ubiquitous – the air we breathe -- that it may be easy to forget how distinctively Western-cum-modern they are in world historical terms. And yet, the significance of cultural dynamics does not thereby disappear; rather, they inform how people respond and react to the shortcomings and failures of modern aspiration. Cultural proliferations deeply inform regional and local permutations of *reactive* modernity (Knauff 2002b; Gaonkar 1999).

This perspective refines and to some degree recasts our understanding of the “anthropology of the good” that Robbins and Ortner both propose as a complement and counterbalance to our emphasis on the “suffering subject” and so-called “dark anthropology” (Robbins 2013; Ortner 2016a). In particular, it casts greater light on people’s own perspectives of what is good, or not-so-

good, under so-called dark conditions (see Laidlaw 2016; cf., Ortner 2016b). In this particular sense, those in remote hinterland regions of Melanesia and elsewhere may actually be ahead of rather than behind the global curve. They are forerunners of a deepening global condition: how it is that people come to terms with the inflated and ultimately unrealistic expectations of an endlessly improving modern future.

Standing received understandings somewhat on their heads, I hence contend that in contemporary circumstance, the sensibilities of peoples in places that are so-called left behind are in fact at the forefront of impending global developments -- and more comparatively relevant than ever.

### Marginally Gebusi

In other work, including works in press and a paper to be considered in seminar here tomorrow, I have considered responses to marginality and to the extremities of being left behind among the Gebusi people of Papua New Guinea – a small rainforest-dwelling group of some 1,200 persons living in the country's remote Western Province. Gebusi have virtually no wage labor, no cash crops, no roads to any other part of the country, a closed airstrip, virtually no government officials or services, and a paltry cash economy that provides on average only 10-20 cents U.S. per day per adult – between one-tenth and one-twentieth of the global abject poverty standard of USD \$2.00 per day. And yet, Gebusi have their own land and subsistence regimes, plenty of food, plenty of land, a growing population without subsistence pressure, no interference from the government or missionaries or other outside agents, and the ability to define themselves to a remarkable degree on their own terms.

Gebusi have developed their own local system of governance, dispute mediation, and conflict resolution – in the total absence of police, government officials, or external political control. Their previously astronomical high rate of precolonial violence – almost one of every three adults dying from homicide – has been reduced to zero. For 28 years there has not been a single killing. They find ways to find meaningful “work” and to keep track of their efforts even



though these are not paid. They have resuscitated a number of indigenous customs and still occasionally perform traditional dances and curings, along with robust feasting and inter-community celebrations. Though it is still a prominently male-dominant society, Gebusi women are significantly less disempowered and disenfranchised than they were before. Wife-beating has declined, gendered pollution beliefs have fallen by the wayside, and there is greater sharing of work tasks, domestic responsibilities, and casual daily conversation between men and women.

Though Gebusi might be described as the left behind of the left behind, they have established their own economic, political, and social control, and their own locally reactive modernity. They have done this by drawing upon their own cultural resources in the context of a seemingly inescapable and irrepressible drive to develop on their own terms, and *not* be simply “left behind.”

This is not to say that Gebusi are a panacea much less that they represent other cultures in Melanesia or elsewhere. As I will discuss tomorrow, even the specter of windfall modernity from elsewhere – the projection or fantasy of incredible compensation from mining or oil/gas extraction – exerts a strong role. Gebusi continue to pine, deeply, for the modern things and life-style that they lack. Jerry Jacka (in press) and Dan Jorgensen (2014), among others, have documented violent if not cataclysmic conditions of domestic and wider social violence and breakdown in contemporary New Guinea societies such as the Ipili and the Telefolmin. As always, there is a rich range of variation across New Guinea. And yet, in many run-of-the-mill and less commonly reported cases, rural life in Melanesia continues apace fairly peacefully and effectively, with local meaning, dignity, and value, despite being largely left behind and marginalized in larger politico-economic terms (e.g., Malbrancke in press).

The notion of reactive or responsive modernity draws on notions of the “vernacular modern” or “alternatively modern” or “alter/native modernity” (e.g., Gaonkar 1999; Mitchell 2002; see Knauff 2002b). These notions have been appropriately critiqued, among other things, for suggesting or implying that alternative modernities are all equal despite their enormous differences in

economic scale, success, or poverty. It remains the case that all world areas – and not excepting the most remote corners within them -- have now been exposed in local context, at least in relative terms, to hugely modern cycles of external exposure and influence, the local boom and bust of money, commodities, and their associated modern styles of life. This is clearly evident among Gebusi, at least in relative terms, since their own commodification and Christianization during the late 1980s and 1990s.

The global distribution of such ebbs and flows reflects the uneven nature of capital intrusion and profit-making or exploitation across time as well as space. As such, people everywhere face an almost inevitable decline or forestalling of economic development at one or another enduring juncture. These conditions that are not *postmodern*; they are not beyond or transcendent of notions of modern progress. Indeed, people typically continue to take lifestyles of perceived modern development, however these are locally construed, as axioms of intensified aspiration and commitment. Under circumstances that are *reactively* modern, the goal of modern development can be all the more important by its mounting *inability* to be actualized in fact. Hence the necessity of *response*, of new ways to become at least *relatively* developed and modern in local terms.

In remote and marginalized areas, conditions of being *reactively* modern are thrown into relief and dramatized by *relative* self-containment and at least *relative* isolation. This does not imply being beyond the reach of global forces. Indeed, lifestyles may be all the more transformed as their continued local emplacement makes them more invisible to or illegible from an outside perspective.

It is in this sense that peoples previously seen to have been most left behind may be useful bellwethers for considering alternative responses and adaptations to conditions of compromised or failed modernity, of precarity, that are now felt and experienced in so many world areas (see Han 2018). Among Gebusi, at least, reactions and responses to economic collapse and modern failure have

produced social formations that thrive in significant ways by drawing creatively on long-standing cultural traditions.

Here Joel Robbins' (2013) and Sherry Ortner's (2016) complementary focus on an anthropology of the Good, or at least the potentially good, seems important. By itself, anthropologists' study of disempowerment and disenfranchisement among stigmatized people -- be they in remote regions of Melanesia, Rohingya in western Burma, or Appalachians in the U.S. -- too easily privileges their victimization to the exclusion of all else. It is important to recognize major differences of economic scale and degree of immiseration, but *also* that poverty and disenfranchisement are in important ways culturally constructed; they are not simply economic or economically absolute.

## Conclusions

I conclude by suggesting that an anthropology of the ethnographically remote and marginal -- of the suffering subject -- should be empowered rather than undercut by the challenges of reactive modernity elsewhere, including both its comparisons to and contrasts with Western contexts. If an anthropology of the good is not always appropriate or applicable, the contextual anthropology of the marginally or peripherally good -- or at least the *not-quite-so-bad* -- remains important to pursue in tandem with critical understanding of political and economic conditions. Local responses can bring to light the relatively positive developments of at least some remote peoples as viewed against the deep disgruntlement and discord of many of Western societies' so-disgruntled members. As such, anthropology of the most so-called left behind can be, like Gebusi themselves, not perfect, but very much alive with meaning -- and with great contemporary value for all of us.