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Department

Goldsmiths Anthropology Research Papers



Studying world society

Keith Hart

# Studying world society as a vocation

Keith Hart

Lecture in honour of Brian Morris, Goldsmiths College, London,  
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## Introduction

I want to start with Immanuel Kant's *Perpetual Peace: a Philosophical Sketch* (1795). He held that Cosmopolitan Right, the basic right of all world citizens, should rest on conditions of universal hospitality, that is, the right of a stranger not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's territory. In other words, we should be free to go wherever we like in the world, since it belongs to all of us equally. The contrast with our routine experience of international travel today could not be more marked. He goes on to say:

The peoples of the earth have entered in varying degree into a universal community, and it has developed to the point where a violation of rights in one part of the world is felt everywhere. The idea of a cosmopolitan right is not fantastic and overstrained; it is a necessary complement to the unwritten code of political and international right, transforming it into a universal right of humanity.

This confident sense of an emergent world order, written over 200 years ago by the man who coined the word 'anthropology', can now be seen to be a product of the high point of the liberal revolution, before it was overwhelmed by its twin offspring, industrial capitalism and the nation state. We now live in a less confident world, but it can still generate moments that touch our universal humanity, like the first man to orbit the

earth in space or a Chinese man confronting a tank on global television.

Kant believed that human co-operation in society required us to rely on personal judgement moderated by common sense, in the double meaning of shared intelligence and taste. This common sense, also the title of his contemporary Tom Paine's (1776) revolutionary pamphlet that launched the American war of independence, was generated in everyday life, in shared social experience (good food, good talk, good company). Earlier he wrote an essay, "Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose" (1784), which included the following propositions:

- 1 In man (as the only rational creature on earth) those natural faculties which aim at the use of reason shall be fully developed in the species, not in the individual.
- 2 The means that nature employs to accomplish the development of all faculties is the antagonism of men in society, since this antagonism becomes, in the end, the cause of a lawful order of this society.
- 3 The latest problem for mankind, the solution of which nature forces us to seek, is the achievement of a civil society which is capable of administering law universally.
- 4 This problem is both the most difficult and the last to be solved by mankind.

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5 A philosophical attempt to write a universal world history according to a plan of nature which aims at perfect civic association of mankind must be considered to be possible and even as capable of furthering nature's purpose.

The world is much more socially integrated today than two centuries ago and its economy is palpably unjust. We have barely survived three world wars (two hot, one cold) and brutality provokes fear everywhere. Moreover, the natural (we would say "ecological") consequences of human actions are likely to be severely disruptive, if left unchecked. Histories of the universe we inhabit do seem to be indispensable to the construction of institutions capable of administering justice worldwide. When Roy Rappaport wrote recently that "Humanity...is that part of the world through which the world as a whole can think about itself" (1999:461), he was repeating the central idea of Kant's prescient essay. The task of building a global civil society for the 21st century is an urgent one and anthropological visions must play their part in that.

For some time now I have been wondering what it would be like to study *world society* (see the Appendix), either as a seeker of Enlightenment like Kant or even as an academic anthropologist. This lecture is mainly about the methods we might adopt for that purpose. Method comes from Greek *meta-hodos*, meaning before (or after) the

road, preparation for a journey or perhaps its destination. Each of us makes an idiosyncratic journey through life and absorbs a personal version of society in the process. The life journeys of anthropologists are more varied than most. So, what version of society do we end up with and how? Could it be improved upon if some of us made it an explicit vocation<sup>1</sup> to study world society as such? But, before discussing how to study world society, it might be worth reflecting on why now is an appropriate time to start doing so.

### Between agrarian civilization and the machine revolution

I maintain that world society was formed as a single interactive network in the second half of the 20th century and that the digital revolution in communications during the 1990s was its effective culmination. That makes us the first generation to experience world society as such and therefore the first to have a chance to study it. We might want to call the study of world society 'anthropology'. What has anthropology been until now and what might it become?

Anthropology in the 18th century was a philosophical enquiry into human nature as the foundation for a democratic alternative

<sup>1</sup> This is an explicit reference to Max Weber's two great essays, 'Science as a vocation' and 'Politics as a vocation' (Gerth and Mills 1948). They should be read as a pair, concerning as they do the need to separate and combine reason and passion at different times.

to the unequal societies of agrarian civilization. Its founders were Rousseau (particularly with the *Discourse on inequality*, 1754) and Kant. The dominant paradigm shifted in the 19th century. Anthropology now explained western imperialism's easy conquest of world society in terms of a racial hierarchy whose evolution was revealed by speculative history. After the first world war, the principle of nationalism was established everywhere and anthropology's chief method shifted as a result to ethnography, to writing about peoples considered to be naturally bounded units, symbolic microcosms of the nation-state. There was no world society as such in the 20th century, just the wars of nations and their subsequent attempts to form associations with themselves as principal actors. So what might anthropology become in the 21st century? That is the question I would like to explore today. But I must first outline my vision of how we arrived at this conjuncture.

In the last 200 years, the human population has increased six times and the rate of growth of energy production has been double that of the population. Many human beings work less hard, eat better and live longer today as a result. Whereas about 97% of the world's people lived in the countryside in 1800 and no region could sustain more than a tenth of its people in towns, half of humanity lives in cities today. This hectic disengagement from the soil as the chief object of work and source of life was made possible by harnessing inanimate

energy sources to machines used as converters (Hart 2001: chapter 2). Before 1800 almost all the energy at our disposal came from animals, plants and human beings themselves. The benefits of this machine revolution have been unequally distributed and the prime beneficiaries have been the same pioneers of western imperialism. Since uneven development has been continuous during this period, we need markers to support any claim that globalization in the second half of the 20th century was of a distinct order again from what preceded it.

The 1860s saw a transport and communications revolution (steamships, continental railways and the telegraph) that decisively opened up the world economy. In the same decade a series of political revolutions gave the leading powers of the coming century the institutional means of organizing industrial capitalism. These were the American civil war, Italy's *Risorgimento*, the abolition of serfdom in Russia, the formation of the Anglo-Indian superstate and Britain's democratic reforms at home, Japan's Meiji Restoration, German unification and the French Third Republic. Karl Marx published *Capital* in 1867 and the First International was formed. The concentration of so many epochal events in such a short time would indicate a degree of integration of world society. But in the 1870s, the share of GNP attributable to international trade has been estimated as not more than 1% for most countries (Lewis 1978); and the most

reliable indicator of Britain's annual economic performance was still the weather at harvest-time. The 'great depression' beginning in 1873 turned out likewise to be an effect of American and German competition on the rate of return of British capital, while the rest of the world's regions were booming. A century later in 1973, so great was the dependence of all national economies on world trade that the OPEC oil price rise set in train a universal economic depression from which we have still not recovered. Shortly afterwards, money futures markets were invented and by the millennium, international trade itself accounted for only a small fraction of the money exchanged globally; and national governments were mostly adrift in a rising tide of money, known simply as 'the markets', conveyed at the speed of light over telephone wires as so many electronic bits.

Capitalism has always rested on an unequal contract between owners of large amounts of money and those who make or buy their products. This contract depends on an effective threat of punishment if workers withhold their labour or people fail to pay their creditors. The owners cannot make that threat alone: they need the support of governments, laws, prisons, police, even armies. Perhaps Karl Marx's most vivid contribution to our understanding of the modern world was his observation that capitalism was actually feudalism in drag, with the owners of the means of production still extracting surplus labour from workers

under threat of coercion. By the mid-19th century it became clear that the machine revolution was pulling unprecedented numbers of people into the cities, where they added a wholly new dimension to traditional problems of crowd control. The revolutions of the 1860s were based on a new and explicit alliance between capitalists and the military landlord class to form states capable of managing industrial workforces, that is, to keep the new urban masses to an unequal labour contract (Hart 2001b). This was a stark reversal of the opposition between capitalists and landowners that had fuelled the liberal revolution in the 17th and 18th centuries, giving rise to its intellectual consolidation in classical political economy. Germany and Japan provided the clearest examples of this new national alliance of classes. I call the phase of world society inaugurated by the revolutions of the 1860s 'state capitalism', the attempt to manage markets and accumulation by means of national bureaucracies. It became general as a result of the first world war and it may or may not be decaying in the face of globalization today (Hart 2001a: chapter 4).

Despite a consistent barrage of propaganda telling us that we now live in a modern age of science and democracy, our dominant institutions are still those of agrarian civilization, the unequal society that ruled the world for 5,000 years before the machine revolution — territorial states, embattled cities, landed property, warfare, racism, bureaucratic administration, literacy,

impersonal money, long-distance trade, work as a virtue, world religion and the family. This is because the rebellion of the western middle classes against the old regime that gave us the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, as well as the English, American and French democratic revolutions, has been co-opted by state capitalism and, as a result, humanity's progressive emancipation from unequal society has been reversed in the last century and a half. Nowhere is this more obvious than when we contemplate the shape of world society as a whole today. A remote elite of white, middle-aged, middle-class men, "the men in suits", rules masses who are predominantly poor, dark, female and young. The rich countries, who can no longer reproduce themselves, frantically erect barriers to stem the inflow of migrants forced to seek economic improvement in their midst. In most respects our world resembles nothing so much as the old regime in France before the revolution, when Rousseau wrote his *Discourse on inequality*, in fact (Hart 2001b, 2002).

The world is now simultaneously more connected than ever and growing more unequal. This only seems counter-intuitive to us because we have been conditioned by the cultural logic of nationalism. There is a contrast between the statistical assumptions that once underlay the construction of national society and those allowing us to make sense of the formation of world society now. Whereas the former were static

and homogeneous, being based on egalitarian principles of random selection and the normal distribution, contemporary approaches to the dynamics of networks assume growth with preferences and a power rule, marked by extreme inequality, with a few major hubs and many weakly connected nodes (Barabasi 2002). That is, the proliferation of networks, as in world markets today, would normally produce a highly skewed distribution of participants. The reduction of national political controls over global markets in the last two decades seems to have accelerated the gap between the haves and the have-nots everywhere, generating huge regional disparities in the process. The task of devising institutions capable of redressing this situation seems further away today than it did in 1945.

As I speak, the United States and Britain contemplate war against Iraq, for the second time in just over a decade. Iraq is of course another name for Mesopotamia, the heartland of Childe's (1954) urban revolution inaugurating agrarian civilization 5,000 years ago. It doesn't seem likely that the old regime's grip over human minds will be erased by bombing Baghdad. Indeed state capitalism, as practiced by undemocratic rulers everywhere, still poses a deadly threat to our embryonic world society. I am tempted to describe Bush's America by the slogan 'State capitalism in one country'. (The Trots among you will get the reference.) What follows, in contrast to this bombardment of our minds by the violent

exercise of power, are some reflections on the possible forms of a humane enquiry into our world today. It takes off from the historical vision I have just sketched, but its spirit is more existential than political as such. I am less concerned with what is out there than with how each of us might make a meaningful connection with it.

### A journey in the world

Each of us embarks on a journey outward into the world and inward into the self.

We are, as Durkheim (1912) said, at once collective and individual. Society is mysterious to us because we have lived in it and it now dwells inside us at a level that is not ordinarily visible from the perspective of everyday life. Writing is one way we try to bring the two into some mutual understanding that we can share with others. Ethnographic fieldwork, requiring us to participate in local society as we observe it, adds to our range of social experience, becomes an aspect of our socialization, brings lived society into our sources of introspection. Now it is feasible for some individuals to leave different social experiences in separate compartments; but one method for understanding world society would be to make an ongoing practice of trying to synthesize these varied experiences. If a person would have an identity, would be one thing, oneself, this entails an attempt to integrate all the fragments of social experience into a more coherent whole, a world in other words, as singular as the self (Hart 2003).

So there are as many worlds as there are individuals and their journeys; and, even if there were only one out there, each of us changes it whenever we make a move. This model of Kantian subjectivity, at once personal and cosmopolitan, should be our starting point; but it will not do for the study of world society. For much of my professional life, I have shadowed the African diaspora through an Atlantic world whose defining moment was slavery: I have lived for some time in England, Ghana, the Cayman islands, Liberia, the USA, Canada, Jamaica, South Africa, France, Scotland, Brazil and Norway. At some point — it was actually in Jamaica 1986-88 — I realized that what I was learning in the Caribbean helped me to integrate the other three legs of my journey to date (Europe, West Africa and North America), to see a pattern of relations. I saw how America was 'new', Europe and Africa 'old' and the Caribbean somehow both; and my guide was C.L.R. James who had traveled between all four points himself, leaving behind a series of books that were a revelation to me (Grimshaw 1992).

I was sitting on a beach in Jamaica reading a collection of James' occasional writings on cricket (James 1986). The place had once belonged to Errol Flynn. My daughter was playing on the edge of the sea. James had been Neville Cardus's deputy as the Manchester Guardian's cricket correspondent in the 1930s. I found myself reading about my father's heroes in the Lancashire cricket team of that period as if it were today's

sports news. I had been devouring everything I could by James since I came to Jamaica to help establish a new graduate school for social science research. I knew that he had lived in Lancashire when he left Trinidad for Britain. It occurred to me that we had lived in the same places — the Caribbean, Britain, America, Africa — in a different sequence, at different times and with very different trajectories. Now, watching my daughter play on that exotic beach, with my father's stories from childhood coming alive again, the gap between this old black man and myself was collapsed into a single moment by the compelling immediacy of James's prose. Generation and racial difference were erased in an epiphany of timeless connection. I felt compelled to meet him and so I wrote the first and only fan letter of my life.

I trace my self-reinvention as an anthropologist, the origin of this talk, to that moment. I have long felt that the collective slogans under which my anthropologist colleagues make professional claims on the public are much less rich and interesting than their individual lives. This is not to say that I or any of my colleagues don't have a complex relationship to the ethnographic tradition, just that our methods and sources are much broader and more idiosyncratic than we often let on. Some time after my Jamaican epiphany, I was able to place myself at different points in my Atlantic journey by an act of the imagination, even in

several places at once. I think of this visualizing process as 'cubist', the ability to see the picture from several perspectives at once (Berger 1992). Caribbean people, whose history of movement has never given them the security of viewing the world from one place, developed this capacity without benefit of art or anthropology. Perhaps I learned this cubist practice from following the Africa diaspora through the main points of their Middle Passage. Atlantic history has some claim to being the crucible of modern world history, but it is not the world. Nor is movement in the world the world itself.

### World society as an object of study

How can we approach world society as a whole? Well, we can give it a singular name. Bush the Elder announced, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, that we now live in a New World Order. Later, in their bestseller of that name, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) announced the arrival of *Empire*, a united form of global sovereignty meant to supervise a neo-liberal world economy. Immediately, the destruction of the World Trade Centre (Kapferer 2002) played on television screens everywhere and we learned that we were all to be part of Bush the Younger's 'war on terrorism', even if this hardly seemed to be the denationalized version of universal sovereignty Hardt and Negri had in mind. It does not pay to confuse social reality with simple ideas; and I for one think of the unity of world society more as a potential than as a fact.

We tend to think and talk of society as an economy these days. Globalization is usually taken to refer to the reduction of political barriers to trade and the consequent freedom of capital to move where it will. Certainly networks established through buying and selling are more far-reaching than ever before, lending some credibility to the idea of a 'world market'. And money itself, increasingly detached from any objective form, circulates the globe without territorial restriction, a rising tide capable of swamping national economies at any time. This apotheosis of capital is closely tied to the development of global communications. The convergence of telephones, television and computers into a single digital technology has already produced as its great symbol the internet, the network of networks, expanding faster than any previous innovation in this field. Mobile telephones have brought instant communication to places where expensive landlines were underdeveloped. And global TV audiences for major sporting events are well over the 2 bn mark, meaning that as many people now sometimes watch the same thing at once as were alive on the planet in 1945.

Mention of the population explosion should remind us that statistics were invented to allow states to count their people. It would have seemed odd in 1861 to generalize in quantitative terms about some feature of the Italian people as a whole; but we now easily absorb the information that Italian

women have the lowest fertility rate in the world. United Nations organizations have been collecting statistics about world population for some time; but we are not yet habituated to think in terms of them, except perhaps for the total (six billions and climbing...). Quantity has been made social in some areas more than others. Counting heads, money, time or energy is more plausible than measuring the quality of life, for example, although this has not prevented economists from attempting the latter task.

When it comes to saying something about world society using these indicators, there is much controversy concerning the measures used. But the real issue is whether we think the present condition of humanity is scandalous or not. Thus Robert Wade (2001), against the prevailing orthodoxy that the liberalization of markets is the best antidote to poverty, has attempted to establish that world society is growing more unequal. I have suggested that the world is divided into a club of rich countries (the OECD) constituting about 15% of the global population and the rest, the poor masses who have hardly any money to spend (45% have less than \$2 a day to live on). Moreover, this division is marked by race, region, age and gender as well as by wealth, leading me to argue that contemporary world society resembles nothing so much as the old regime of pre-revolutionary France (Hart 2002).

We can say something about the changing morphology of human society too. Anthropologists have known about social networks at least since the Manchester School (Bott 1954). But the idea that social relations are now more readily constituted as open-ended networks than as closed corporate hierarchies (see the Appendix) is more recent. No-one has done more to argue the case than Manuel Castells (2001:1-2):

A network is a set of interconnected nodes. Networks are very old forms of human practice, but they have taken on a new life in our time by becoming information networks, powered by the Internet. Networks have extraordinary advantages as organizing tools because of their inherent flexibility and adaptability, critical features in order to survive and prosper in a fast-changing environment. This is why networks are proliferating in all domains of the economy and society, outcompeting and outperforming vertically organized corporations and centralized bureaucracies.... Networks were primarily the reserve of private life; centralized hierarchies were the fiefdoms of power and production. Now, however, the introduction of computer-based information and communications technologies, and particularly the Internet, enables networks to deploy their flexibility and adaptability, thus asserting their

evolutionary nature. At the same time, these technologies allow the coordination of tasks, and the management of complexity. This results in an unprecedented combination of flexibility and task performance, of coordinated decision-making and decentralized execution, of individualized expression and global, horizontal communication, which provide a superior organizational form for human action.

The implications of this idea for the study of world society are profound, even if its premises may be challenged. Is this the catalyst inaugurating Kant's *Perpetual Peace*, the cosmopolitan society whose human preconditions he explored in his *Anthropology* (1798), for the sake of which he invented the name of our discipline? Are we reaching the end of a world system of territorial states? If so, how will the law be administered? One way would be for networks to constitute themselves as self-regulating clubs. Notions of justice can be disseminated without a centralized administration. Nor should we imagine that network society is necessarily non-hierarchical or open, for that matter. A recent popular text, *Linked: the new science of networks* by A-L Barabasi (2002), claims that 'scaled networks' in a wide range of fields — social, technological and biological — conform to a mathematical model known as a power rule in which a few nodes (hubs) are highly connected and

most are only weakly so. Think of the air transport network of the United States, for example, with its O' Hares and thousands of small airports. Such a model would explain why, left to its own devices, a world economy made up of unregulated market networks is becoming more connected and more unequal at the same time.

### Worlds of the imagination

It is not as if the problem of managing the infrastructure of world society would be entirely new. We already have the precedent of global institutions devised in the twentieth century, after the first and second world wars. But there are others too. Several countries or federations of states are so large, so diverse and so self-contained as to constitute worlds in their own right. The United States, Russia, China, India and Brazil come to mind, while the European Union is the most dynamic political experiment on the planet. We could add to these examples some of the larger states formed in temperate zones by the British and Spanish empires or indeed any polity predicated on combining diversity. If we want to imagine what a world society might look like, we could examine these cases and ask which features should be adopted on a more inclusive scale. For our task is to make a better world society than the one we have, defined as it is by the myopia of national consciousness (Fanon 1959). We will discover that the modern principle of federalism is as old as that of the nation-state and much better suited to wide

best ethnographies. And as a precedent for such an enquiry we could turn to Rousseau's extraordinary inventions of the 1760s: *the Social Contract*, *Emile*, the *New Heloise* and the *Confessions*, through which he revolutionized European thinking about politics, education, sexuality and the self, each time with a new genre of fiction and each time pointing to a better world.

If society is hard to imagine, because it is inside us, not out there as we often believe, then we can follow Durkheim's (1912) prescription and make an external object of it, as nature. The world may be considered scientifically as an ecology, a biological system, our habitat and home; and humanity is that part of life on earth that can think, the frontal lobes of the biomass, as it were. This confers on our species a certain duty of stewardship (Rappaport 1999). And it does seem that a green political agenda is more likely to mobilize humanity to do something about worsening world conditions than any attempt to address global social problems directly. I like to pose the following hypothetical question. Which news item is more likely to provoke the public's moral indignation: grey seals dying of oil pollution in the North Sea or a Mozambican killed by skinheads in East Germany? It is really no contest, since nature is out there and racism is inside all of us. Again, if global warming does melt the ice caps, the fate of coastal cities will be urgent enough perhaps to provoke some sort of global framework for collective action to materialize eventually. Humanity has apparently survived the threat

of nuclear holocaust, for now, in part because it provoked a substantial international peace movement. Here then is one likely focus for a world society animated by activist networks — the mitigation of global risks.

At another level, the last half century saw us leave the planet's surface for the first time and generated concrete images of how the earth looks from outer space, a powerful symbol of human unity indeed. And natural science locates that unity in an intellectual vision that has given us, among other things, the machine revolution whose uneven development is the underlying fact of the last two centuries, drawing humanity into ever closer association. There are those (like Latour 2002) who would assimilate this 'mononaturalism' and its twin, a condescending multi-culturalism (we understand the unity of nature, so they can have their little cultures) to a vision of western imperialism. Certainly there are few anthropologists today ready to sign up for the hegemony of natural science. So here too we have a pressing topic for discussion when we study world society.

### A way forward for anthropology?

Of course, the peoples who were forcefully incorporated into world society by western imperialism in the 19th century have not been outside modern history during the last one. They have been making it. If we are looking for continuing evidence of the cosmopolitan tradition in anthropology, we



should look to the intellectuals of the anti-imperialist movement, like C.L.R. James (1938) and Frantz Fanon (1959), who aspired to extend the achievements of western civilization to all humanity. None of these was greater than Mohandas K. Gandhi. Gandhi's critique of the modern state was devastating (Parekh 1989). He believed that it disabled its citizens, subjecting mind and body to the control of professional experts, when the purpose of a civilization should be to enhance its members' sense of their own self-reliance. He proposed instead an anthropology based on two universal postulates: that every human being is a unique personality and as such participates with the rest of humanity in an encompassing whole (the individual and the species of Kant's essay). Between these extremes lie proliferating associations of great variety. As an Indian who had absorbed much that the West has to teach, Gandhi settled on the village and therefore on agricultural society as the most appropriate social vehicle for human development.

This backward-looking solution to the problem of the modern world makes Gandhi a typical 20th century figure. But the problem he confronted has been largely ignored by social theorists. It is this. If the world of society and nature is devoid of meaning, being governed by remote impersonal forces known only to specially trained experts, that leaves each of us feeling small, isolated and vulnerable. Yet

modern cultures tell us that we are personalities with significance. How do we bridge the gap between a vast, unknowable world, which we experience as an external object, and a puny self, endowed with the subjective capacity to act alone or with others? The answer is to scale down the world, to scale up the self or a combination of both, so that a meaningful relationship might be established between the two. Gandhi chose the village as the site of India's renaissance because it was where most Indians lived, but more importantly because it had a social scale appropriate to self-respecting members of an agrarian civilization. Moreover, he devoted a large part of his philosophy to building up the personal resources of individuals. Our task is to bring this project up to date.

What then might anthropology become in the twenty-first century? My guess is that the general premise of universal movement will lead people to seek stable order in the least and most inclusive levels of human existence, that is in the self as an identity and the world as a unity; and especially in the construction of a meaningful relationship between the two. This is close to Durkheim's (1912) idea of religion as a bridge between the known and the unknown. We are each unique personalities and the world is, at least potentially, composed of humanity as a whole. We have hitherto put an enormous effort into exploring the varieties of classification and association that mediate these extremes. This was not the priority of

the liberal founders of anthropology and it may not be the priority of students in future. If I were to name what the focus of a future anthropology might be, I would choose 'subjects in history' or perhaps 'self-in-the-world'.

There would be plenty of scope in such an anthropology for a world history whose antecedents cross-cut the discipline's previous periods and paradigms. Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (1754) could well be taken as the basic text for an historical anthropology of unequal world society, with Morgan (1877) and Engels (1884) providing 19th century versions of the same and Jack Goody (Hart forthcoming), Raymond T. Smith (1996) and others updating the project for late twentieth century audiences. But our contemporary concern with subjectivity will require such grand narratives to be accompanied by individual and collective life histories of the sort pioneered by Sidney Mintz in *Worker in the Cane* (1960) and Richard Werbner in *Tears of the Dead* (1991). Brian Alleyne's collective biography of North London's New Beacon Circle, *Radicals Against Race* (2002), is another example from nearer home.

One might ask what anthropologists would actually do when they study world society. Let us assume that ethnographic fieldwork of the kind that we are now familiar with will remain an important source of

professional knowledge. But this practice is coming under considerable political pressure (Grimshaw and Hart 1993, 1995). Each of us will try to resolve the problem in our own way. In my own case, I restricted the method of prolonged fieldwork to one stay in Ghana of two and half years, when I started out. Since then, I have preferred to visit new places under the auspices of a job rather than as a researcher. People expect visitors to do something for them these days and I would rather struggle with the bias of a known public position than try to explain that I am not a CIA spy. I have been most often a teacher or a development consultant in the employ of governments or international agencies. For the last five years, I have lived in Paris without either a job there or any pretension to carrying out local research. Wherever I am, I read a lot and I write. In recent years, I have begun to explore the possibilities of the internet, of web searches and e-mail. It is becoming ever more feasible to make universal connection without physical movement, without leaving home. All of this adds up to social experience. I make an anthropology out of that. Fortunately, I have had institutional support for this pretension. As Meyer Fortes said, after he helped to set up his trade union, the Association of Social Anthropologists of the U.K., "Social anthropology is what social anthropologists do" and he had the means of establishing their credentials. I am acutely aware that this trajectory is not readily available to others entering the discipline now. I just hope that

each takes personal advantage of the historical opportunities and is not crushed by the constraints.

### **Kant's Copernican revolution revisited**

In concluding, I must return to Kant's great example which has been inexcusably omitted from most modern accounts of anthropology's history. Copernicus solved the problem of the movement of the heavenly bodies by having the spectator revolve while they were at rest, instead of them revolve around the spectator. Kant extended this achievement for physics into metaphysics (Cassirer 1981:148-149).

In his preface to *The Critique of Pure Reason*, he writes, "Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects... (but what) if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge?". In order to understand the world, we must begin not with the empirical existence of objects, but with the reasoning embedded in our experience itself and in all the judgments we have made. Which is to say that the world is inside each of us as much as it is out there. This is why one definition of 'world' is 'all that relates to or affects the life of a person'. Our task is to bring the two poles together as subjective individuals who share the object world in common with the rest of humanity.

The 19th and 20th centuries, in identifying society with the state, constitute a counter-

revolution against Kant's Copernican revolution. This was launched by Hegel, whose *Philosophy of Right* (1821) contains the programmes of all three founding fathers of modern social theory (Marx, Weber, Durkheim) rolled into one. This counter-revolution was only truly consummated after the first world war. The result was a separation of the personal from the impersonal, the subject from the object, humanism from science. It was enshrined in the academic division of labour and it is why most of you have never heard before of Kant's seminal contribution to anthropology. This is the split that the decline of state capitalism in the face of the digital revolution might allow us to reverse. In my recent book, *Money in an Unequal World* (2001a), I argued that the cheapening of the cost of information transfers as a result of the digital revolution makes it possible for much more information about individuals to enter into commercial transactions at distance that were largely impersonal until recently. This repersonalization of the economy has its counterpart in many aspects of contemporary social life, not just in the forms of money and exchange. It involves a new idea of the person, one that is based on digital abstractions as much as on the emergence of more concrete forms of individuality. The customized interactions that most academics now have with amazon.com and similar suppliers of books reflect this trend, at the same time personal and remote.

I do not imagine that I am alone in responding to our moment of history in this way. Elsewhere I have commented on a collection of papers about teaching anthropology (Dracklé and Edgar forthcoming) which reveals the steps academic professionals are already taking to incorporate Kantian subjectivity into their methods. Brian Morris, in whose name this lecture is being given, was himself a pioneer of teaching anthropology as a way of constructing a relationship between the self and universal society. Clearly one consequence of the use of new technologies in teaching is that learning can now be much more individualized and ecumenical at the same time; and this juxtaposition of self and the world in itself poses a threat to the traditions of the academic guild. Here then is one source of a renewed emphasis on subjectivity. It all adds up to a radical revision of conventional attitudes to subject-object relations, grounds indeed for us to reconsider the positivist dogmas on which so many modern university disciplines are based, including social anthropology's paradigm of scientific ethnography (Grimshaw and Hart 1995).

It has long been obvious to me that learning anthropology would be impossible if we were not, each of us, human beings in the first place. Anthropologists who once could rely on public ignorance as support for their exotic tales must now cope with mass mobility and communications. We have to consider seriously what our

expertise can offer that is not delivered more effectively through novels and films, journalism or tourism. We live in a time when both the rhetoric and the reality of markets encourage individuals to choose the means of their own Enlightenment. It would be surprising if trends in the teaching of anthropology did not reflect all this; and many of my colleagues are responding to the challenge by pushing back the boundaries of anthropological education.

It is little more than a decade since the end of the Cold War and the social consequences of this event are just beginning to filter through. One feature of the post-war universities has been the rise of research as a means of evaluating the status of institutions and their individual members. This was led by state and corporate funding of armaments-related research in the natural sciences during the period of the Cold War.

The social sciences, without the same funding or prestige, followed suit. Social anthropology was no different. Teaching was marginalized to the point of professional insignificance. It is time for anthropologists to take an interest in teaching again, not just as a way of improving the service they give to their students, but as part of their own intellectual development. I would suggest that the trend is already moving against corporate funding of large academic research enterprises; and that the universities are entering a period in which they will attract a new public interested in lifetime self-education or die.

The humanities in general and anthropology in particular are well-placed to take advantage of such a trend. All is not lost. But our methods will have to change significantly and Kant's Copernican revolution is one beacon lighting the way.

I have made a case today for research and writing, teaching and learning in anthropology to be existentially motivated. This entails a self-conscious revival of the western liberal tradition that culminated in Kant. There is nothing wrong with this tradition except that its best slogans were hijacked, following the machine revolution, by industrial states bent on imperialism and class warfare. After two centuries of lies and distortion, it is hardly surprising that most people now view them with suspicion. It is our job to reinvent the human truth of the liberal revolution using words that carry new and more general conviction.

Old versions of the universal suppressed the particulars that constitute human experience. The new universal must grant that it can only be realized through those particulars. The truth of social experience is always local, but we need to extend ourselves to grasp what kind of world society we live in. Such a global society is constituted by power relations, but the bridge to an understanding of our common humanity is moral. Morality is the ability to make personal judgments about the good and bad behaviour of people, including ourselves. Anthropology

ought to be a means of helping us to do that more effectively. There is no guarantee that people in the future will want to employ experts on the human condition trading under a five-syllable word of Greek origin. But if they do, I hope they will ask anthropologists to make world society personally meaningful for their students and the public.

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## Appendix

### Terms of Association

- Associate** To connect or join together; combine.
- Society** The totality of social relationships linking a large group of human beings
- Societas** (Latin) A league of allies committed to mutual support in the event of an attack on one of them (sokw-yo from root sekw- to follow)
- Société** (Medieval French) A bounded unit with a single centre, i.e. a state
- State** Society centralized as a single agency
- Territory** The land and waters under the jurisdiction of a state
- Nation** A people who share a state
- Federation** A union in which power is divided between a central authority and the constituent political units
- Corporation** A group of people combined into or acting as one body
- Community** A sense of belonging to a group; people united by a common purpose
- Social Network** An open-ended, often informal set of interconnections
- Market** A social network constituted by buying and selling
- The Internet** The network of networks; the system of global communications

## About the author

Keith Hart is a researcher at the University of Aberdeen and lives in Paris. He grew up in Manchester and read classics at Cambridge before taking up social anthropology. His principal research has been on Africa and the African diaspora. He contributed the concept of the informal economy to development studies and has worked as an economic journalist and development consultant. He has some experience of gambling and criminal enterprise. Recently he published *Money in an Unequal World* (Texere). But the main theme of his anthropology has been movement and identity. He has taught at the following universities: East Anglia, Manchester, Yale, Michigan, McGill, Chicago, Cambridge, West Indies, Pavia, Stellenbosch, Turin, Oslo, Northwestern. While at Cambridge, he was Director of the African Studies Centre and won the first teaching prize in the humanities and social sciences. He was an examiner at Goldsmiths during the 1990s. At this time he founded Prickly Pear Press (with Anna Grimshaw) and the amateur anthropological association. The present pamphlet is one of a series of essays aimed at reconstituting anthropology as the personal study of world society.

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- Civilization** The ethical, rational and cultural standards by which a great people live; the largest unit below world society
- Humanity** A collective noun for all people, past, present and future; a quality of kindness
- World** The earth with its inhabitants; universe; human society; people as a whole; all that relates to or affects the life of a person.
- World society** The totality of social relationships linking the inhabitants of earth

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