



## INTRODUCTION

**T**he anthropology of the contemporary has seemed to me best done by doing it, that is to say, by laying out examples and reflections on those examples. As will be apparent in this book, my inclination is more to show than to tell, in Wittgenstein's sense. At the same time, frequent well-meaning interlocutors, including reviewers of this book in manuscript form, have asked me to explain what I mean by the notion. As a means of acknowledging these requests, while at almost the same time refusing to honor them fully, I offer the following introductory thoughts.

### **On the Anthropology of the Contemporary**

What is the contemporary? The ordinary English-language meaning of the term “the contemporary” is: “existing or occurring at, or dating from, the same period of time as something or somebody else.” But there is the second meaning of “distinctively modern in style,” as in “a variety of favorite contemporary styles.”<sup>1</sup> The first use has no historical connotations, only temporal ones: Cicero was the contemporary of Caesar just as Thelonious Monk was the contemporary of John Coltrane or Gerhard Richter is the contemporary of Gerhard Schroeder. The second meaning, however, does carry a historical connotation

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and a curious one that can be used to both equate and differentiate the contemporary from the modern. It is that marking that is pertinent to the project at hand. Just as one can take up the “modern” as an ethos and not a period, one can take it up as a moving ratio. In that perspective, tradition and modernity are not opposed but paired: “tradition is a moving image of the past, opposed not to modernity but to alienation.”<sup>2</sup> *The contemporary is a moving ratio of modernity, moving through the recent past and near future in a (nonlinear) space that gauges modernity as an ethos already becoming historical.*

There are three guiding ideas here. First, the contemporary is not an epochal term. For much of the twentieth century various movements that labeled themselves modernist were fixated on “the new.” And the identification of the new was frequently tied to a more or less explicit philosophy of history in which the new was usually better or at least the result of an inevitable motion. In parallel with the culture concept, it was held that eras or epochs had a unity that tied diverse domains of practice and experience together into a whole that was, if not seamless, at least coherent. But as the faith and belief in such ontological entities (culture, epochs, progress) has been challenged, it has become apparent to some that understanding modernism and “the modern” required some critical distance from its own assumptions. This distance could be achieved through historical work that showed the contingency, inconsistencies, differential strata underlying the surface unity, and the like. Or it could be achieved through a conscious abandonment of epochal thinking, including as many of its presuppositions as could plausibly be reexamined. In this light, it is clear that in many domains old and new elements do coexist in multiple configurations and variations. Thus, if one no longer assumes that the new is what is dominant, to use Raymond Williams’s distinction, and that the old is somehow essentially residual, then the question of how

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older and newer elements are given form and worked together, either well or poorly, becomes a significant site of inquiry.<sup>3</sup> I call that site the contemporary.

For example, the fact that the human genome has been mapped, and population differences at the molecular level identified, does not mean that older understandings of race disappear in the light of this new knowledge. But neither does it not mean that all of the older understandings of what constitutes difference undergo a total transformation. Rather, the problem for an anthropology of the contemporary is to inquire into what is taking place without deducing it beforehand. And that requires sustained research, patience, and new concepts, or modified old ones. The purpose is not destruction or deconstruction but a reevaluation; its goal is not reform or revolution but rather a type of remediation.

Once again, observers as well as the practitioners of the contemporary are not principally concerned with “the new” or with distinguishing themselves from tradition. Rather, they are intrigued by the operations of the distinction modern/contemporary as the clustered elements and stylized configurations of the modern are observed in the process of declusterings, reconfigurations, and different stylizations or made to do so. As I have argued in *Anthropos Today*, this mode of observation and practice is one of secession rather than of the avant-garde or its presumed opposite, the neoconservative.<sup>4</sup> Secession marks, observes, and stylizes in a recursive manner.

Second, there is a difference between emphasizing reproduction and emphasizing emergence. This difference holds for the subjects in the world as much as for analysts. Most of anthropology and significant portions of the other social sciences concentrate on how society or culture reproduces itself (and this includes many models of “change”) through institutions, symbolic work, power relations, or the cunning of reason. And there

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is much to be said in favor of this mode of analysis. But it has become apparent that there are other phenomena present today, as no doubt there have been at other times in other places, that are emergent. That is to say, phenomena that can only be partially explained or comprehended by previous modes of analysis or existing practices. Such phenomena, it follows, require a distinctive mode of approach, an array of appropriate concepts, and almost certainly different modes of presentation.

Third, by “anthropology” I do not mean ethnography understood as a practice developed to analyze a specific type of object—the culture and/or society of *ethmoi*—so as to contribute to a specific genre, the monograph (or journal article). Nor do I mean philosophic anthropology in the nineteenth-century European sense, whether materialist or idealist, whose object was the nature or essence of Mankind and whose genre was the treatise. Nor do I intend the mixed forms of research and writing that proliferated around this unstable object, *l’homme*, which attempted, while continually failing, to bring the transcendental and the empirical into a stable relationship, so powerfully described by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*, even if Foucault himself was tempted for a time to overcome and stabilize things, an attempt he eventually abandoned. Rather, I take the object of anthropological science (*Wissenschaft*) to be the dynamic and mutually constitutive, if partial and dynamic, connections between figures of *anthropos* and the diverse, and at times inconsistent, branches of knowledge available during a period of time; that claim authority about the truth of the matter; and whose legitimacy to make such claims is accepted as plausible by other such claimants; as well as the power relations within which and through which those claims are produced, established, contested, defeated, affirmed, and disseminated.

Thus, taken as an object domain, contemporary anthropology is neither as broad as traditional ethnography nor as grand as

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classic philosophic anthropology nor as ambitious as the human sciences. This narrowing of scope has some advantages: there are good reasons to accept the claim (*sic*) that a restricted form of anthropology refers to an actual object domain in the present whose recent past, near future, and emergent forms can be observed. Of course, one can observe and analyze that object domain in diverse manners. One challenge, the one at hand in this book, is to contribute to orientations that would mark a means of producing anthropological knowledge anthropologically.<sup>5</sup>

*Marking Time* is neither a standard monograph nor a traditional collection of essays. It is not a monograph in that it does not have a single guiding argument, clearly stated at the outset, and rigorously held to task in the ensuing chapters. Neither is it simply a book of essays in that the chapters that follow are not previously published pieces grouped together and unified by having the same author. Rather, there are connections between the chapters; these connections have a pliable logic that readers may discern could have been assembled differently, producing a different flow and effect. One might say that the mode of assemblage is a contemporary one. Finally, and to the point, the book's chapters share both a temporality and a historicity; they were written during a period of labor, work, and exploration within a particular problem space. The contours and dynamics of that (nonmetric) space became clearer during the course of a series of orienting experiments in form.<sup>6</sup> Those experiments were all calibrated, with varying degrees of precision and success, toward designing inquiry. Design is a dynamic and collaborative practice about which there is more to be said and which currently forms a topic of intense collaboration and future work.<sup>7</sup> For the present, however, the first question at hand is: what is inquiry? And thus readers eager for definitions and guidelines will now receive some, with at least a preliminary rationale for why they are being presented in their current form.

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### Inquiry

Following John Dewey and Richard McKeon, we can define a term as a word + a concept + a referent. Thus the same word, for example, “philosophy” or “anthropology,” can take its place in different terms. There is a frequent confusion between a word and a term. At the outset, therefore, it is appropriate to highlight some of the key concepts at work in the terms used in this work.

The general issue of how to characterize anthropological inquiry has been a surprisingly underexplored subject. Given this gap and given my formation and inclinations, the tradition of pragmatic and nominalist thinking was the place I was likely to find conceptual help. John Dewey’s 1938 magnum opus (written at age eighty), *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, proved invaluable in providing a general orientation as well as specific concepts albeit with certain critical limitations.<sup>8</sup> The concept and practice of inquiry were central to John Dewey’s life work. He published a large number of studies on the topic, both highly technical and more popular, spanning a period from his collected *Essays in Experimental Logic* (1903, 1916) to the 1940s. The pertinent conceptual orientation of Dewey’s term inquiry is taken up in the subsequent section.

The main limitations of his approach for anthropological inquiry, it seems to me, are found in his inability to leave the practices, skills, and narrative forms of traditional philosophy behind, even though time and time again he explicitly advocated doing so.<sup>9</sup> Dewey’s practice remains abstract even though his rhetorical aim was to move the reader away from such a traditional mode of thinking and writing. One might well expect that a thinker who insisted with force and conviction that the task and challenge of contemporary philosophy was to overcome traditional philosophy’s insistence on certainty, abstraction, and timelessness would himself seek to integrate the analysis of substantive topics — specific problem situations — into the very warp

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and woof of his practice. But in Dewey's case one would be disappointed. He remains a traditional philosopher *malgré lui*. Dewey (1859–1952), like Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), simply did not concern himself with the genealogical details of the “merely ontic,” any more than did Dewey's contemporary analytic philosophers (Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, and others), who perfected the technique of using thin, school-masterly examples to draw large philosophic conclusions. In sum, Dewey's treatise lacks any sustained attempt to instantiate the analytic process he advocated.<sup>10</sup>

Fundamentally, Dewey is not nominalist enough. He writes despite himself as if his objects were atemporal. He does not provide any historical contextualization to locate and delimit his key terms, such as “breakdown,” “situation,” and “reconstruction.” The danger in this practice is that one risks ontologizing these categories.<sup>11</sup> Various other thinkers, such as Reinhart Koselleck with his “history of concepts,” developed a form of inquiry that would have been consistent with the overall project of Dewey's logic but would have entailed a different set of intellectual skills. Although it would be of interest to explore the historical conditions in which Dewey's terms, practices, and modes were formed, such an undertaking obviously is neither my intent nor my interest here. Rather, I am trying to appropriate conceptual tools that had been forged for certain problems, and to refashion them in the hope that they will provide analytic purchase for different problems.

### Elements

Despite the limitations of Dewey's approach, his claims about the nature of inquiry provide helpful orientation points for a renewed practice of inquiry. As an introductory device, I propose a series of Deweyian claims about the nature of inquiry.<sup>12</sup>

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1. "*Inquiry begins in an indeterminate situation*," Dewey argues that inquiry is a continuous, reiterative process. Inquiry is not restricted to scientific or traditional philosophic questions per se but is involved with ordinary life as well as larger political and cultural issues. Hence inquiry begins midstream, always already embedded in a situation, one both settled and unsettled. Inquiry moves through the process of inquiry itself to other situations and other problems, themselves both stabilized and troubled. Thus, it is perfectly appropriate to begin with tentative parameters of a situation to be inquired into and tentative understandings of what is at stake.

2. "*and not only begins in it but is controlled by its specific qualitative nature*." There are situations that may reach a determined state rapidly and others where it is not possible to tell before the inquiry is well under way whether, and in what manner, and for how long, it will take to move beyond a first loose state to one in which both the situation and its determinants become clearer, more determinate. Thus, to claim to know beforehand precisely what one is going to do, or to find, as grant proposals demand, would constitute bad method, poor logic, and falsely disciplined inquiry. Or, more accurately, it seems to me, run the risk of not doing inquiry at all.

3. "*Inquiry, as the set of operations by which the situation is resolved (settled or rendered determinate)*": Inquiry is not an empiricism in the sense of discovering what is out there as if it were transparent and passive, simply waiting to be represented. Nor is inquiry theory driven in the sense that a situation can be reduced to a particular case of a more general theory (this is in part because one cannot know beforehand what the status of one's concepts are or whether the initial situation has any unity). Inquiry is a form of constructivism or operationalism: Dewey means this in a common-sense way (problems and thought require action to exist) and in a more technical sense (since inquiry arises within

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a problematic and indeterminate situation, the inquirer is not outside the situation, nor is she in a position such that she could construct something that was not to a degree present already). Hence, operations are necessarily part of the indeterminate situation once it is taken up by an inquiry.

4. *“has to discover and formulate the conditions which describe the problem at hand.”* By “discover the conditions” Dewey “indicates” that inquiry is situated and its goal is to isolate something in the world that is causing or occasioning effects. By “formulate,” Dewey is making a strong claim, one that runs throughout his work, that the giving of form (whether discursive, logical, artistic, scientific, political, and the like) is a primary task in living in general as well as in specific practices themselves conditioned by traditions and habits. Form giving is thus an essential goal of “describing” a problem and of shaping an inquiry. Description rather than explanation is the goal, but description is not a naïve act but one that can arise only within a process of inquiry that is engaged in one or another type of form making.

5. *“For they are the conditions to be ‘satisfied’ and [are] the determinants of success.”* Since the problem lies in the situation and the situation is conditioned by various factors, it is only through discovering and giving form to elements that are already present that the inquiry can proceed. Hence the process involves staying in the midst of the things of the world and transforming them in specific ways so as to give them the kind of determinative form that can be known.

6. *“Since these conditions are existential, they can be determined only by observational operations; the operational character of observation being clearly exhibited in the experimental character of all scientific determination of data.”* Inquiry is experimental in its form giving. Hence the interest of an experiment is its ability not to represent a preexisting situation nor to construct an entirely new one but rather reiterated and controlled adjustment. There are

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no abstract criteria available that one could deploy beforehand to judge whether the experiment has succeeded or not: the reason for this is that “*the conditions are existential*.”

7. “*The conditions discovered, accordingly, in and by operational observation, constitute the conditions of the problem with which further inquiry is engaged; for the data, on this view, are always data of some specific problem and hence are not given ready-made to an inquiry but are determined in and by it.*” That is to say, a successful inquiry will arise in, work through, and seek form for concrete contexts. Obviously this claim does not mean that there are no generalities in the world or in knowledge, only that it is improper to neglect the fact that they arose from a set of operations and observations that were partially determined by and partially determinative of a prior indeterminate situation.

8. “*As the problem progressively assumes definite shape by means of repeated acts of observation, possible solutions suggest themselves.*” These solutions may be practical solutions to a problem in ordinary life; they may be scientific solutions to a defined problem of an experimental form; they may be artistic solutions to a given challenge of artistic practice, etc. Hence, problems and solutions are terms that are joined in practice and in that sense coproductive.

9. “*The process of reasoning is the elaboration of them.*” The solution to a particular problem consists in a series of steps whose particularities are not known before those steps are undertaken. The observation and reflection on the process can be called reason as long as one is clear that reason is neither a faculty of mind nor a quality of the things themselves, but rather a distinctive mode of taking up the practice of inquiry.

In retrospect, Dewey’s attempt to make his logic applicable to any problem, anywhere, and anytime both gives it its power and constitutes its core blind spot.<sup>13</sup> In parallel with what anthropologists used to call the “ethnographic present,” one might say that Dewey wrote in the “philosophic present.” Of course, situ-

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ating his thought historically does not discredit the insights and analytic tools he forged; it only shows that the situations Dewey analyzed were, at least in part, historically specific. Today we can see that Dewey's pragmatism was only partial and that his adjacency was insufficiently conceptualized to serve the anthropologist of the contemporary without modification.