

# Creating Consilience

*Evolution, Cognitive Science,  
and the Humanities*

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**FROM STUDIOUS IRRELEVANCY  
TO CONSILIENT KNOWLEDGE: MODES  
OF SCHOLARSHIP AND CULTURAL  
ANTHROPOLOGY<sup>1</sup>**

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Why is most cultural anthropology largely irrelevant? The voice of that particular field in broader academic discussions is almost inaudible, its scholars are no longer among the recognizable and important public intellectuals of the day, and its contribution to public debates is close to nonexistent. This last feature is all the more troubling, as the subject matter of cultural anthropology would seem to place it at the center of crucial social debates.

Although I will substantiate this rather harsh diagnosis, the point of this chapter is less to offer a jeremiad than to propose an etiology and perhaps a cure for the current predicament of cultural anthropology. My diagnosis is that this is a largely self-inflicted condition. Cultural anthropology has no place in public discourse because most cultural anthropologists have talked and written themselves out of public debate, mostly because they pursued fetishistic interests or advocated methodological postures that are of no possible relevance or interest to culture at large. This is beginning to change. However, that change is to a large degree happening not in the mainstream of cultural anthropology but rather at its margins.

I should start by acknowledging that there *is* a large amount of respectable and, indeed, excellent research conducted in the field—that is hardly the question. What is at stake is that a certain intellectual style, mostly of a rather recent vintage in cultural anthropology but much older in other fields, has stymied the creative energy and social import of cultural anthropology. Equally obviously, not all anthropology is affected by this recent plague of irrelevancy. First of all, the fields of biological anthropology and archaeology seem to be in rude health. I also mention that the traditional concerns of cultural anthropology are currently being given a new lease of life and often a much more lively public relevance by evolutionary biologists and economists, suggesting that there may be such a field as the “science of culture” or at least some incipient moves toward such an integrated discipline.

1. Parts of this essay reprise material from an article published in *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 3(4): 344–358. Thanks to EJ Brill Publishers for permission to reprint these passages.

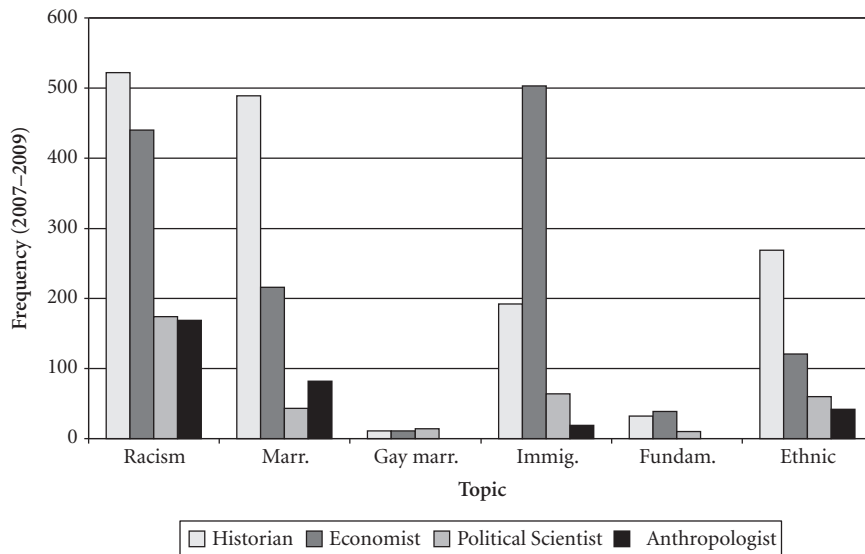
### PUBLIC DECLINE AND A SELF-IMPOSED “MISSION SHRINK”

Consider topics of public debate (e.g., the organization of marriage), family and gender relations, the construction of social trust and norms of cooperation, the consequences of large-scale immigration, the effects of universal cultural contact, the mechanisms of religious persuasion, the relations between religious institutions and civil society, the processes of ethnic conflict. On all these and related questions, a whole variety of disciplines, from economics to neuroscience and from evolutionary biology to history, have a great deal to tell the public—whereas cultural anthropology is, by and large, too busy with obscure academic fads and self-inspection.

This is not just an impression. A survey of mentions of cultural anthropologists and cultural anthropological themes in public debates certainly confirms this eclipse of the field. Consider for instance Richard Posner’s highly detailed study of *Public Intellectuals*, which comprises a carefully constructed list of individuals with high-profile mentions in public debates (in books, magazines, journals, or newspapers), mostly in the United States in the last 20 years (Posner 2001). Quite remarkably, the list only includes *five* anthropologists out of 416 public intellectuals. More remarkably still, three of those are dead (Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Ernest Gellner) and the other two are elderly (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Lionel Tiger). One might think that the sources used by Posner privilege pundits relative to specialists, as well as politics at the expense of other social concerns, but that is not the case. His list includes such names as Jerome Bruner and Howard Gardner (education and psychology), Steven Pinker (linguistics and psychology), Tzvetan Todorov (literature and moral philosophy), Robert Nozick (philosophy), or Thomas Sowell (economics). Note, incidentally, that the five influential anthropologists (influential, that is, outside academic anthropology) are, apart from Mead, fairly alien to the relativist, “textual” fashions of recent cultural anthropology. Lévi-Strauss, Gellner, and Tiger would certainly count among the much-reviled “positivist” ranks, and Tiger, in particular, has consistently argued for the inclusion of biological evidence into anthropological thinking—a position that is anathema to most contemporary cultural anthropologists (Tiger 1969; Tiger and Fox 1971).

For more detailed evidence, consider the occurrence in newspaper articles of the term *anthropologist* compared to the names of other specialists of social and cultural issues. Figure 1 presents the results of a recent Lexis-Nexis search using the terms *racism*, *marriage*, *gay marriage*, *immigration*, *fundamentalism*, and *ethnic* (see more detailed results in the Appendix). The figure suggests that, in the context of a discussion of racism, anthropologists are about a third less likely to be quoted or mentioned than either historians or economists. The same goes for immigration, marriage (gay or not), and fundamentalism. Ironically, even the word *ethnic* is associated with *historian* *six times* more often than with *anthropologist*. Again, this would suggest that, in the discussion of topical social phenomena, the views of cultural anthropologists are no longer really considered at all.

Why this lack of influence? Barring an unlikely conspiracy of media people against cultural anthropologists, the most plausible explanation is that newspapers and magazines do not quote cultural anthropologists because there is nothing much to quote. That is, cultural anthropologists simply do not have a lot to say about such things as gay marriage or immigration—or more specifically they have little to say that actually con-



**FIGURE 1** Results of Lexis-Nexis search, Source: Major world newspapers from January 1, 2007 to June 30, 2009. Source criteria: joint occurrences (e.g., *racism* and *historian*) within a 50-word neighborhood, roughly a paragraph. See more detailed table in Appendix.

nects with public debates about such issues. Perhaps the strident relativism of cultural anthropology (each culture to its own, values are culture bound, cultural concepts are untranslatable, etc.) seems increasingly irrelevant in a world where people with different norms just have to live together, and, therefore, confront norms and concepts without any respect for the sacred boundaries of each “culture.” Perhaps the field’s recent addiction to academic fads has made cultural anthropology even less relevant. Disquisitions about culture as text, postcolonialism, or even more arcane issues of reflexivity may not seem of much help to people who wonder how children will be raised in non-traditional families, under what conditions mass immigration can result in peaceful co-existence, what tools we have to resolve entrenched religious hatred, and other such matters for serious public debate.

“Mission creep” is the process, much feared by the military and some politicians, whereby a limited tactical goal turns into an impossibly ambitious political adventure. Cultural anthropology has, in the last 50 years or so suffered from the opposite problem, a quite dramatic form of “mission-shrink.” Compared to its original agenda, and even to what is routinely claimed to be its mission in textbooks, cultural anthropology has gradually narrowed its focus to a few obscure problems.

Consider the agenda. Most anthropology textbooks seem to reiterate what has been the official mission of anthropology for the last century: to provide an understanding of human nature through the most challenging and characteristic of the species’ features, namely, the production of vastly different norms, concepts, and social structures. The language may have changed a bit, but the overall goal is still expressed in these terms. As a recent textbook puts it:

Anthropologists research, observe, analyze and apply what they learn toward an understanding of the many variations of the human condition. A grounding in past human adaptations, both biological and cultural, contributes to our understanding of adaptations today. (Lenkeit 2007)

The same ambition is expressed at the outset of *Anthropology for Dummies*:

Why isn't everyone the same? Why do people worldwide have differences in skin and hair color and ways of greeting one another? Why doesn't everyone speak the same language? (C. M. Smith 2008)

Now the interesting thing about this agenda is that virtually nobody in cultural anthropology works on such questions—indeed, most cultural anthropologists find this kind of scholarly ambition either quaint or presumptuous. Instead of addressing issues of human nature and cultural diversity, they have more or less renounced the “nature” part of the equation. Rather than address “big” issues, most cultural anthropologists seems content with narrowly circumscribed, often geographically limited, investigations.

This “mission shrink” is all the more deplorable as it happened right at the time when other fields started to provide a wealth of findings and methods that, when combined with cultural anthropological scholarship, could renew our perspective on human cultures. Rather than welcoming these advances, it seems that cultural anthropology has severed links with the other fields that could feed this program, including its sister fields of biological anthropology and archaeology, and it has persistently ignored spectacular developments in psychology, economics, linguistics, and cognitive science.

### MODES OF SCHOLARSHIP: SCIENTIFIC AND ERUDITE

Why did this happen? I have a tentative diagnosis for this condition that requires we look into what I call *modes of scholarship*. These are different ways in which particular scholarly contributions are organized, such that they are recognized as valid contributions to a field, and their authors as bona fide members of the “guild.” Professional groups maintain specific criteria for entry, and specific criteria for the productions of the guild. This applies equally well to academic disciplines, which are not directly governed by an external market. One’s work is academic scholarship to the extent that *other* academics in one’s field consider it as such. Each specific community (generally co-extensive with what is called a “field”) has shared criteria for who is allowed to join and what counts as a valid contribution. In the same way as a guild, members of a “field” protect their common interest (the reputation of their activity) by restricting entry to those who fulfill certain conditions. In the case at hand, this amounts to: How does the community of cultural anthropologists actually decide that this person could be considered for a position as a cultural anthropologist or decide that their publications count as contributions to cultural anthropology?

To understand the current predicament, the opposition between the humanities versus science, is both too simple and too general. There are, in fact, three distinct modes of scholarship, which I call science, erudition, and salient-connections.

### The Science Mode

The science mode should not take too long to describe. This is not because scientific authority and authoritativeness are simple matters—far from it. Philosophy of science is difficult precisely because it is not easy to explain what this particular mode of scholarship consists of and what really makes it different from (and vastly more successful than) all other ways of gathering knowledge (Klee 1999). This does not matter for present purposes, however, because the scientific mode, if difficult to explain, is very easy to recognize. You know it when you see it. Here is a short list of the common “symptoms” by which we recognize a field that employs the science mode of scholarship:

1. There is an agreed corpus of knowledge. What has been achieved so far is taken as given by most practitioners. The common corpus also includes a set of recognized methods, and a list of outstanding questions and puzzles to solve. People also tend to agree on which of these questions are important and which only require some puzzle solving and some tidying up of the theoretical landscape.
2. The fundamentals of the discipline and its results are explained in textbooks and manuals that are all extraordinarily similar, as the essential points and the way to get there are agreed in the discipline.
3. It does not really matter who said what or when. Indeed, many practitioners have a rather hazy picture of the history of their disciplines. Many young biologists would have a hard time explaining what the New Synthesis was, who was involved, and why a synthesis was needed in the first place. Revered figures from the past may be a source of inspiration, demonstrating how to make great discoveries, but they are not a source of truth. Darwin believed in continuous rather than particulate heredity and in some transmission of acquired traits—on both counts we think he was simply wrong, great man though he was (Mayr 1991).
4. People typically publish short contributions. They do not need to establish why the specific problem addressed is a problem or why the methods are appropriate, since that is all part of the agreed background.
5. The typical biographical pattern is that the aspiring member of the guild is intensively trained from an early age in the specialized field and makes important contributions after only a few years of training.
6. There is a large degree of agreement (because of the various features already mentioned) on whether a given person meets the requirements for being a practitioner of the particular field, and there is also a large agreement on how important each individual’s contribution is.

Again, let me emphasize that this is by no means a description of *science*, but only of the scientific mode of scholarship, identified here on the basis of fairly superficial but sufficient criteria. By the same token, I am not claiming that all “scientists” work in that way (more on that later) or that “science” only occurs when these features apply. The point of all this is to draw a contrast with other modes of scholarship, where legitimacy and standards are established quite differently.

### The Erudition Mode

Another mode of scholarship is erudition, understood as the requirement that specialists of the discipline should have detailed knowledge of a particular domain of facts. Consider, for instance, Byzantine numismatics or the history of Late Renaissance painting. We expect specialists of these fields to have knowledge of the corpus of coins or paintings. We turn to them to identify new findings. The erudition mode was essential to (and still plays a great part in) the development of many scientific fields. For instance biology started as natural history and still includes a large part of it.

The features of erudition are partly similar and partly different from those of science, as we can see by listing some of erudition's key features:

1. There is an agreed corpus of knowledge. There is also a large agreement on what remains to be done. For instance, only a small part of the extant corpus of Mesopotamian tablets has been deciphered. A great number of languages remain to describe. So the remaining tablets or languages are offered to the aspiring specialist as a possible domain of study.
2. A great deal of knowledge is not made explicit in manuals. One picks it up by working under the tutelage of more experienced practitioners and immersing oneself in the material for many years.
3. The history of the field matters and practitioners generally know it. There are some great masters, whose intuitions matter a lot, although they may have been wrong. For instance, to this day classical scholars know their Bachofen or Straus, religious scholars cite Otto or Eliade. But these are not considered infallible sources.
4. People often publish short descriptive contributions, e.g., the first description of a new insect genus or the phonology of a specific language. They also compile monographs that incorporate vast amounts of information about a particular domain (e.g., the comparative morphology of ant species, an encyclopedia of New-Guinean languages, a concordance of Ben Jonson's plays, a catalogue raisonne of Guido Reni).
5. Age is a necessary component of competence. Older experts are generally better, because expertise consists in the accumulation of vast amounts of specific facts, also because an expert needs the kind of intuition that is only shaped by long-lasting familiarity with the material. Only a seasoned Renaissance scholar can tell you that this particular painting is from the Venetian not the Milanese school. A younger scholar may be misled by superficial features.
6. Within a narrow field, people agree on whether a given individual is competent or not, generally based on that person's knowledge of a monograph-sized subfield.

Now, as I said earlier, there is nothing essential about these distinct modes—indeed, as we shall see, they are often found in combination, and this may be an index of “healthy” disciplines. Also, whether a given field uses more or less of one of these modes can change with time. Technical change can have dramatic effects on the mix of modes. Classics used to be strongly based on erudition in the corpus. Knowing obscure (but relevant) textual sources was a *sine qua non*, and the outcome of many years of sustained training, the way it still is for, say scholars of Indian philosophy. Now that the entire Greek and Latin canon

is available (and searchable) on CD-ROM, this particular form of knowledge cannot be used as a criterion for admission.

### HOW SCIENCE AND ERUDITION COMBINE

The science and erudition modes are frequently found side by side in healthy empirical disciplines. Biology and linguistics are excellent examples.

Molecular biologists these days work mostly in the scientific mode. Evolutionary biologists, in contrast, are supposed to have a “field” (e.g., lekking in antelopes, social coordination in wasps), which means that the erudition mode is required as well as the scientific one. These are not exclusive. Some fields such as ecology often require both extensive erudite knowledge (e.g., how different species interact, who are the predators and prey of each genus, what minimal density of resources is required, etc.) as well as science-like scholarship (how to run simulations, how to apply optimal foraging models, knowledge of epidemiological techniques, etc.). There is often a fruitful exchange of information between activities belonging to these two modes. Natural history and evolutionary theory feed into each other. To take but one example, one of the most important evolutionary theorists of the century, E.O. Wilson, is also one of the world experts on ant behavior (Hölldobler and Wilson 1990; Wilson 1975). In a similar fashion, linguistics these days combines the two modes in various ways, depending on subfield. Some linguists work purely in the science mode (e.g., asking what formal models can account for regularity in language) and others are more field oriented (e.g., describing Amazonian languages), and many do both. Some scientific models of linguistic evolution, for instance, were inspired by erudite comparisons of creoles and pidgins (e.g., Bickerton, 1990). These overlapping domains of erudition and science modes are illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Although one can find both modes in the same field, even in the same person, they remain distinct in terms of both the purpose of people’s activities and the manner in which they are conducted. When they are doing science, biologists or linguists focus on the empirical support that can be given to a particular hypothesis. They also create the relevant domain of data, either by performing experiments or by selecting relevant evidence from a corpus (e.g., testing the hypothesis that all languages have a noun-verb distinction by going through hundreds of grammars). Erudition is not hypothesis- or explanation-driven but description driven. For instance the aspirant specialist is enjoined to catalogue all coins found in a particular Byzantine palace (or all forms of this specific genus of orchid) because collection (or species) in question has not been described before. Obviously, there is no such thing as “pure” or “atheoretical” description. Specific hypotheses about what is and what is not relevant are generally embedded in the agreed descriptive methods of the discipline.

The distinction between modes of scholarship should not be confused with another, and I would argue particularly misleading, distinction between fields that belong to the sciences or the humanities or social sciences. The distinction of modes is actually orthogonal to that institutional distinction. There are many examples of the erudition mode in the sciences and quite a few examples of the scientific mode in the humanities (see Figure 3 for some examples).



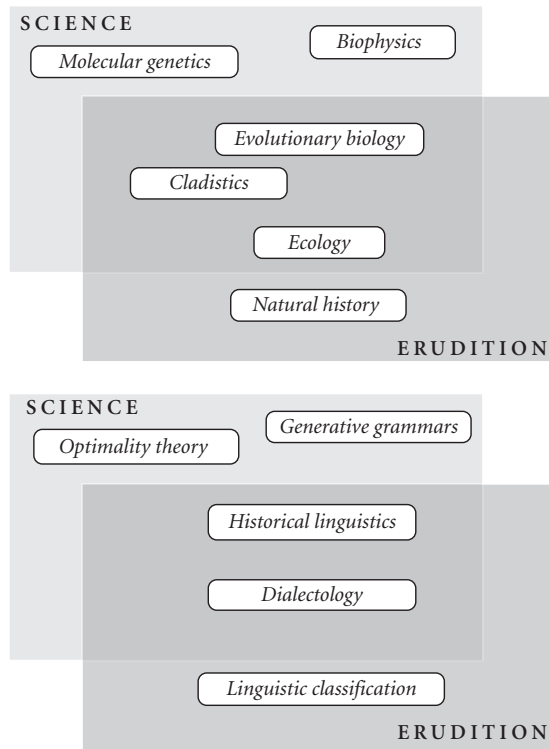


FIGURE 2. The overlap between the “science” and “erudition” modes in two disciplines: linguistics and biology. Various research programs illustrate either one or both of the modes of scholarship.

### A THIRD MODE OF SCHOLARSHIP: SALIENT CONNECTIONS

The third mode of scholarship is the most elusive one, as it has not been systematically described, yet it is also most important to our understanding of many modern disciplines, including cultural anthropology. In this mode, people assess new contributions in terms of the connections they establish between facts or ideas which, by themselves, are not necessarily novel or even interesting. Although this way of judging new work has been around for a long time, it has become characteristic of many academic fields of a recent vintage and of the recent evolution of older disciplines. I call this the “salient connections” mode.

Again, I should provide examples before a model, because this is a phenomenon we all know when we see it, even if we do not always reflect on the mechanism at work. For instance, a recent book re-frames the discourse of love in Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets as an expression of the colonial outlook. The lover’s loving gaze transparently expresses the conqueror’s prospect on a recently discovered, clearly gendered, and mythically virginal New World. A student is planning to work on Indian public executions during the Raj as a form of theater, a ritualized performance that constructs colonial power at the same time as it undermines it by exhibiting the gossamer of its dramatic texture. Another colleague has recently finished a study of gay fathers in the Caribbean in the framework

	Science mode	Erudition mode
In the sciences...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Model of genomic imprinting</li> <li>• Physics of plate tectonics</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparative morphology of varieties of sea-cucumbers</li> <li>• Geological formations of England</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
In the social sciences...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Models of cooperation and defence against free-riders</li> <li>• Role of demography in political upheavals</li> <li>• Effect of religion on social cohesion</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compared European nationalisms</li> <li>• Caste systems of South-Asia</li> <li>• Diffusion of epic themes across Eurasia</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
In the humanities...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General organization of narratives</li> <li>• How ecology constrains state formation</li> <li>• Why visual arts only use certain kinds of symmetry</li> <li>• How literacy affects the contents of cultural knowledge</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tempera in late Flemish painting</li> <li>• Byzantine numismatics</li> <li>• Modulation in Couperin's harpsichord pieces</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>

FIGURE 3. The science/erudition distinction is orthogonal to the traditional Sciences, Social sciences, and humanities dimensions. Examples of *specific* research projects that instantiate all six cells in the matrix.

of Benjamin's and Bourdieu's accounts of culture, technology, and late capitalism. Steel drums and strong rum prop up the local habitus of globalized self-empowerment.

What is the common thread in these disparate examples? They all seem to offer a new connection between elements that were previously known to everyone in the field and indeed, in many cases, to any educated reader. For instance, all literary scholars presumably know their Shakespeare and educated folk know a little about the conquest of America. But they (supposedly) had never considered Ophelia as American. In the same way, most historians know about the political organization of the Raj and its fondness for state pageantry. They are also cognizant of the "comedian's paradox" from Diderot or some other source. The author's hope is in the fact that the connection between the two—between state ceremonial and precarious theatrical mimesis—is new. In the same way, most cultural anthropologists have some notion of the Caribbean as a place of contrasting influences and original cultural mixes. They also know a little about the various ways in which homosexuality is construed in different places, as well as cultural variation in fathers' duties or roles. The innovative point is to put all these together, creating salient associations, especially by

throwing in Bourdieu and Benjamin—two rather dour, bookish, and strait-laced dead Europeans who would seem far removed from your typical Trinidadian gay dad.

One could multiply the examples, but it may be of more help to compare the features of this with the other two modes:

1. In salient-connections fields, there is no agreed corpus of knowledge. Indeed, there is no “knowledge” in the sense of accumulated and organized information, but rather a juxtaposition of different views on different topics.
2. There are no manuals, no agreed techniques or methods. Indeed, each contribution constitutes (ideally) a new paradigm or method, each author is an island.
3. The history of the field, its self-definition, as well as the reframing of past theories, are crucial. A lot of scholarly activity in salient connections-based fields consists in citing various masters, commenting on their texts, finding some connection between what they said and the issue at hand. In cultural anthropological studies, authors like Walter Benjamin or Pierre Bourdieu or the entire Frankfurt school are part of this Pantheon (a very ephemeral one, with a high turnover rate). The masters are generally invoked as validating authority. That is, the particular fact that one is describing (the gay Caribbean father, etc.) is presented as illustrating the general principle laid down by Benjamin or some other luminary. (Incidentally, these authors are *never* shown to have been wrong. Indeed, their work is never discussed as having any connection to empirical fact that could make them right or wrong. Benjamin’s or Bourdieu’s conceptions of culture are not judged in terms of how much they explain). Also, there is a great deal of emphasis on the self-definition of the field, the ideas various practitioners have about what they do and what they ought to do, compared to what others do. Indeed, most important works are supposed to be not just contributions to the field, but also reflections on the field itself. For instance, a study of German post-Expressionist 1960s cinema will be praised, not just because it tells us a lot that we want to know about that specific genre, but also because it re-frames our views of the connections between cinema or society. A study of recent rock songs is good because it establishes a new approach to popular culture.
4. Books are more important than articles. This, in part, reflects the fact that each contribution should ideally re-frame a field as a whole, introduce a new way of looking at issues, and so on, something that cannot be done in a short article.
5. There is no specific developmental curve. Some authors produce interesting connections in their first piece of work, others are seasoned specialists of the erudition mode who, at some point, decide to let their hair down, as it were, and let salient connections govern their next project.
6. There is no agreement whatsoever on who is a competent performer in this mode, apart from the (generally dead) masters like Bakhtin or Benjamin or Raymond Williams for cultural studies, Derrida or de Man for literary criticism. A consequence is that there are tightly coalitional cliques and exceedingly bitter feuds about who should get what jobs, who is allowed to publish and where, and so on.

In the last three decades or so, some fields have dramatically evolved from almost pure erudition mode to the salient-connections mode. Literary criticism is a case in point. In

the past, one could not really expatiate on Shakespeare's plays without thorough knowledge of the First Folio and Quartos and other such recondite source criticism. This kind of erudition is still practiced, but it is not the major criterion of a relevant contribution to Elizabethan studies (Garber 2004). Saying something new about the plays is what matters. One could say that the specialists have (perhaps excessively) taken to heart Forster's dictum. They only connect.

There are various accounts of why this happened to literary studies, whether this is a Good Thing or not, and if not, whether it is all the fault of that awful Leavis or of the dreaded French structuralists (Kermode 1983). I am not enough of an erudite to adjudicate between these normative interpretations of history. I can only comment that polemical narratives generally get in the way of a proper explanation. Neither jeremiad ("No-one knows the Canon anymore!") nor triumphalist epic ("We have overcome! The Canon is dead") is of great help here.

### EFFECTS OF SALIENT CONNECTIONS

How does all this work? Outsiders—and disgruntled guardians of the erudite faith, in recently transformed fields like literary studies—will say that *anything goes* in terms of salient connections. Although one can see some merit in this interpretation—a hypothesis that is supported by a great deal of the evidence—it is probably not sufficient. Here, I will not consider the historical and cultural origins of the phenomenon, since that is better left to some serious historian of the social sciences. I can, however, indicate in what way it *cannot* be explained.

Some readers may want to suggest that what I described here as a specific mode of scholarship is, in fact, simply explained as the influence of a particular set of ideas (e.g., readers of early versions of this essay suggested such movements as postmodernism for instance). However, that surely is not the case. First, the mode of scholarship identified here is much more widespread than adherence to this or that particular intellectual fashion (Gellner 1992). Second, and more important, it would be rather strange to assume that what people do (in this case, the way academics legitimize scholarship, recognize new members of the guild, etc.) is sufficiently explained by their own explicit account of why they do it (in this case, a particular intellectual fad). After all, we are supposed to account for fashions, which are no more self-explanatory than any other social dynamics.

Whatever the origins, what matters are the consequences of the salient-connections mode of scholarly activity. These are fairly obvious for all to see. The connections are salient—but only to *some* people, with the proper background. They do not travel well. Try telling a biochemist that Walter Benjamin's essays are a great backdrop to a description of gay fathers in Trinidad. The expected cognitive effects of such connections are, by necessity, confined to a fairly limited market. Indeed, the salient connections are often difficult to use even with apprentices in the field. Ernest Gellner once made fun of those poor Wittgensteinian philosophers trying to spread the Good News that all philosophical problems of epistemology or metaphysics reduced to linguistic issues. They often found themselves teaching students who had never been much bothered by any philosophical problems, epistemological or otherwise, and, therefore, received the

news with undisturbed placidity (Gellner 1959). There is a rich comic vein here, also mined by David Lodge, several of whose characters reflect on the difficulty of teaching that the margin is the text or that the Canon is dead to students who do not read much text and had barely noticed that there was a Canon (Lodge 1988).

A more serious problem, obviously, is that such scholarship does not in general solve any questions, contribute to a more precise or accurate description of the world, or even show us the limitations of our knowledge (nor does it aim to do any of these things). Salient connections are a sometime thing, not durable and useable information. They leave the world as they found it, to coin a phrase.

So what is to be done?

### INTEGRATED STUDY OF CULTURES: AN INCIPIENT PROGRAM

A good place to start is with one's most cherished assumptions – those most likely to be wrong and damaging. The field of cultural anthropology suffers from an acute form of the anxiety of influence, in the form of a special fear of *reduction*. In cultural anthropology, intense collaboration with fields that could provide us with useful findings and methods (e.g., demography, economics, psychology, history or genetics) is generally seen as dispensable, and often as downright misguided. It is frequently the case that an argument can be dismissed as “reductionist,” as though the epithet required no further elaboration (Ernst 2004). What is meant by this is, in general, that the author has made use of findings or facts that belong to another domain that strictly “social” or “cultural” facts (McCauley and Lawson 1996).

A great many scholars of things cultural remain unaware that causal reduction is omnipresent, is, indeed, the main mode of explanation in all the empirical sciences, from biophysics to geology and from chemistry to neuroscience (Bechtel 1993). The point is so clear that philosophers of science never discuss whether causal reduction is a “good thing,” but rather how it works, under what conditions, between what kinds of facts or principles, and so on (Bechtel 1993; McCauley and Bechtel 2001). Practitioners, too, are quite happy with reduction. Psychologists blithely “reduce” mental phenomena to information processing between assemblies of neurons, neuroscientists are happy that neural events “reduce” to organic chemistry, and so on. No successful empirical discipline is based on the strange fantasy of ontological autarky.

This may explain why the most promising developments in understanding human behavior are based on *integrated* scholarship. What I mean by “integrated” models are explanatory models that bypass traditional divisions between “levels” or “domains” of reality (Bechtel 1993), in this case “culture” as opposed to human psychology, genetics, or economics. I also mean models that are resolutely opportunistic in their use of whatever tools do the explanatory work, regardless of particular disciplinary tradition from which they originated.

The prospect of an integrated study of human culture is now much brighter, because of recent and dramatic progress in three crucial domains, namely, human cognition, economic models of behavior, and evolutionary biology. Findings in all three domains are already changing perspectives on the study of culture:

1. The transmission of cultural representations, concepts, and norms, can be seen as bounded variations within limits set by human cognitive capacities (Sperber and Hirschfeld 2004). Cognitive scientists and evolutionary anthropologists have found that early developed cognitive principles form a background of expectations that make possible the acquisition of particular cultural norms and concepts (Boyer and Barrett 2005) in such domains as folk-biology (Atran 1990, 1998), kinship and ethnic categories (Hirschfeld 1994, 1996), racial categories (Kurzban et al. 2001), religious beliefs (Atran 2002), and social interaction (Cosmides and Tooby 1992; Fiske 1992; Tooby and Cosmides 1996).
2. Economic theory provides us with the most precise way of describing opportunities and predicting choices, and, of course, extends beyond strictly economic issues (Gintis 2000a). Behavioral and experimental economics in particular have shown how to go beyond strict rationality assumptions (Smith 2003), and how to include in economic models such factors as reputation (Kurzban et al. 2007), punitive feelings (Fehr et al. 2006; Price et al. 2002), and intuitive standards of fairness (McCabe and Smith 2001). These models account for the spread of culturally specific modes of cooperation (Gintis 2000b, this volume).

We cannot provide good accounts of human culture without placing it in its evolutionary context. A persistent misunderstanding in the social sciences is the notion that evolutionary models are about “closed” behavioral programs, inflexibly developed whatever the external circumstances (Tooby and Cosmides 1992). If this were the case, evolution would indeed be irrelevant to any behavior for which there is variation among individuals, including human cultures as well as most behaviors of complex organisms. However, evolution in humans and other species results in highly context-sensitive decision-making systems, such that features of local history fix the parameters for people’s preferences. This kind of evolutionary model provides a good account of such disparate cultural phenomena as reproductive strategies, including teen pregnancies (Ellis et al. 2003; Quinlan 2003); different reactions and similar sensitivity to cheating in social exchange, among foragers and industrial societies (Sugiyama et al. 2002); local features of “race” categories (Kurzban et al. 2001; Sidanius and Veniegas 2000); and many more (Buss and Kenrick 1998; Barkow et al. 1992).

### BACK TO WHAT REALLY MATTERS

Are the studies cited in the preceding section evidence for a new “paradigm” in the study of human cultures and behavior? It is not certain—nor is it clear that this question is really important. What is clear is that a vast domain is open to cultural anthropological investigation, provided that the practitioners accept substantive re-tooling and discard old fetishes. If slogans are needed, an integrated study of culture should proclaim the great values of *reductionism*, the ambition to understand the causal processes underpinning behaviors; *opportunism*, the use of whatever tools and findings get us closer to that goal; and *revisionism*, a deliberate indifference to disciplinary creeds and traditions.

The integrated view of human culture—what some may call a “vertical integration” in the field—will allow cultural anthropology to return to the highly ambitious set of questions it should have addressed all along. Here is a tentative list:

- Are there natural limits to family arrangements and what are they? Can these limits shift with new reproductive techniques and economic change?
- Can people have an intuitive understanding of large societies? Or are our intuitive understandings of the social and political world limited to the small groups we evolved in?
- Why are despised social categories essentialized? Why is it so easy to construct social stigma?
- What logic drives ethnic violence? Ethnic conflicts are more violent and seem less rational than traditional warfare. They sometimes involve whole populations as victims and perpetrators. What psychological processes fuel this violence?
- Why are there gender differences in politics? What explains women’s exclusion from group decision-making in most societies, and their reduced participation in many other societies?
- How are moral concepts acquired? How do locally significant parameters affect general concepts of right and wrong?
- What drives people’s economic intuitions? Does participation in market economies create an understanding of market processes?
- What explains individual religious attitudes? Why are some individuals more committed to the existence of supernatural agents than others are? Why is there religious fundamentalism and extremism? Why should people want to oppress or kill others in the name of a supernatural agency?

Obviously, the list is not meant to be exhaustive, but it is indicative, at least, of the potential scope and diversity of a vertically integrated approach to cultural anthropology. The list should also suggest why an integrated program is a Good Thing: because it finally allows cultural anthropology to talk about things that matter. As I argued at the beginning of this chapter, cultural anthropology is simply not heard in the public forum, and the simplest explanation is that it is not talking—or rather, not talking about anything of great importance. This should change soon.

## APPENDIX

**Table 1.** Results of Lexis-Nexis Search. Source: “major world newspapers,” over three two-year periods. Source criteria: joint occurrences (e.g., the words *racism* and *historian*) within the same 50-word neighborhood, roughly the size of a newspaper article paragraph. Figures for 2007–2009 include occurrences to July 1, 2009 only.

		2003–2005	2005–2007	2007–2009
Racism	Historian	925	909	922
	Economist	384	506	440
	Pol scientist	154	191	174
	Anthropologist	214	232	169
Marriage	Historian	627	595	489
	Economist	299	300	216
	Pol scientist	87	85	43
	Anthropologist	90	94	82
Immigration	Historian	206	263	192
	Economist	467	702	503
	Pol scientist	46	98	64
	Anthropologist	16	25	19
Gay marriage	Historian	24	16	11
	Economist	30	24	11
	Pol scientist	25	27	14
	Anthropologist	2	1	0
Fundamentalism	Historian	41	46	32
	Economist	24	31	39
	Pol scientist	7	16	10
	Anthropologist	4	2	0
Ethnic	Historian	282	324	269
	Economist	111	133	121
	Pol scientist	72	90	60
	Anthropologist	61	69	42

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