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New and Old Worlds: A Perspective from Social Anthropology*

MARILYN STRATHERN

Girton College, University of Cambridge, Huntingdon Road, Girton, Cambridge CB3 0JG, UK. Email: ms10026@cam.ac.uk

People build bridges in many ways, and not least over time, spanning the different epochs that define their lives. For social anthropologists, this process is far from self-evident. Diverse ways of thinking about transitions summon anthropology's traditional mode of making bridges, cross-cultural comparison. This account thus interweaves materials from Europe and Melanesia. Stimulated by an ethnography of an East German town being precipitated into a new world, it focuses on abrupt transitions and their recurrence. What is happening when a radical break with one kind of past is also recalled as looking forward to a moment when another kind of past might finally come into its own? Pursuing such paradoxes, the article turns to today's Papua New Guinea where many have seen colonialism – like socialism – come and go in a lifetime. People's aspirations for the future, raising questions about the abruptness of breaks and the crisis that new times create, throw out challenges as to how to envisage worlds old and new.

Perhaps one of the commonest forms in which we experience building bridges lies in the way we link together our actions over time. Whether or not we are consciously thinking of the past or future, our own sense of personal continuity establishes some kind of bridge over what might otherwise seem disparate or even disjointed.¹ If we can think of ourselves at quite diverse moments or on different occasions, we also take for granted that we can connect them up in some way, if only through juxtaposing them in our thoughts.

I draw on that everyday Euro-American² capacity in order to reflect on how a social anthropologist might bring different kinds of time into his or her purview. First-hand

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1. A topic much debated in early modern philosophy, from which this formulation could have come. In Locke's case, it is at the root of what is attributed to him as the invention of consciousness (Balibar 2013 [1998]).

2. I use 'Euro-American' as a broad designation of 'Western' discourse and knowledge traditions to which the 'we' of the opening paragraph, and the indeterminate 'one' that follows, belong.

research is central to the fashioning of ethnography through fieldwork, yet always brings with it a specific temporal horizon. That is why anthropologists often deploy a particular tense they call the ‘ethnographic present’, that is, they write in the ‘time’ of their fieldwork. Yet that apparent co-evalness is only half the story. The present that the ethnographer inhabits – the world that made it – is not always the best vantage point from which to apprehend what is happening. Stolcke (Martinez-Alier 1989) became aware of this when she went to Cuba to study family organization, and discovered the archives that turned her into an early champion of historical anthropology, now ‘one of the leading modes of anthropological analysis’ in Western anthropology (Ssorin-Chaikov 2019, 320). Yet what is familiar in relation to the past is less readily graspable in relation to the future. The latter may be thrown into relief when current events bring new comprehensions that could not have been formulated at the time of study. As the anthropologist’s own world changes, he or she may in certain respects get closer to, rather than farther from, the subject of study. Thus, the present ecological crisis, which precipitates imaginings of the end of the world, suddenly casts the first extinction of the Amazon in new light. As far as the indigenous populations of the Americas are concerned, it has been said, the end of the world has already happened.³

In a less dramatic register, something similar applies to conceptualizations of time. I exploit the paradox that the best time to study (this or that) is not necessarily the time that the researcher is in. As far as the future is concerned, only its forward flow will reveal that of course. However, that sense of a forward flow also evokes a particular temporality, the way time is inscribed into the perception of things, which might turn out to be more culturally specific – and changeable (Ringel 2016) – than one could have thought. And might affect, among other things, how one perceives catastrophe and crisis. Current work in the former East Germany is illuminating here. The contemporary Pacific is another, and here some of their Melanesian inhabitants have surprises in store for us when it comes to thinking of the flow of time.⁴

Preamble

The metaphor of bridge building plays with notions of separation and joining. While Euro-Americans may try to make sense of their different selves in an ongoing narrative that links them all, they may also become self-conscious about that linearity. Countless experiments in genres of literature or art encourage non-linear thinking. Indeed, it is likely to be *against* a perception of a continuous life or narrative that practitioners turn to discontinuous modes of expression, deliberately ‘disrupting’ or ‘transgressing’ a purported sense of uninterrupted sequence. Their own, innovative, trajectory becomes the bridge. Then again, perceived breaks between past and present circumstances become discontinuous in another register when they take the

3. The destruction of 95% of the population of the Americas was the ‘First Great Modern Extinction’, observe Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2017 [2014], 104). They title their book, *The Ends of the World*.

4. Further comment on some of the material presented here can be found in Strathern (2019).

form of cataclysmic events, such as invasion, loss of livelihood or enforced population movement, and continuities attributed to the past or hoped for the future bridge people's efforts to reconcile themselves to the present. In either case, it may be supposed, life must go on as time must flow.

The notion that, whatever happens, time itself proceeds forward can be taken as axiomatically as cycles of growth and decay or effect following cause. Of course, there are innumerable ways of living the life this might imply, and when mutual legibility or intelligibility falls short then a particular need for bridge-building comes into view – from one mindset to another, from one milieu to another. The bridge anthropologists routinely traverse consists in their language of description (under which I subsume theory and analysis), which is forever modified by comparativist intent. Anthropology would be nothing without its practices of comparison (however critically perceived, Viveiros de Castro 2004; Candea 2019), and the 'bridge' they call relations (Strathern 2020). Among themselves, anthropologists vary as to whether such relation-building seeks common ground or enhances conceptions of radical difference. Time flows here, too, in the inexorable displacement and replacement of paradigms, theories and prevailing concepts.

These few remarks serve as a reminder that senses of discontinuity are as ever-present as continuity. That said, their relationship to how people make time turns out to be another matter. Let me plunge into detail midstream, for the detail that ethnographers produce is bridge-building in another sense: it makes us pay attention to the company we are keeping.

European Experiments

That 'times themselves might suddenly and most unexpectedly change' is a lesson that observers could well learn, Ringel (2016, 391; Ringel 2018) says, from Hoyerswerda, which after years of boom and growth has become Germany's 'fastest shrinking' city. Its residents are living at a moment that is at once postsocialist and postindustrial. Yet the implied temporality, being after what has gone, looks too much like an evocation of the past as a source of (quasi-cultural) explanation to take properly into account the city dwellers' 'strategy for dealing with the changes at hand' (Ringel 2016, 401), for that has multiple temporal dimensions. Their most pressing concerns are what their individual and collective futures are going to be. The ethnographer thus opens up his analysis to where he perceives the orientations of his interlocutors lie. His focus is the role that the future plays in current lives, and the aptness of what he calls the 'presentist methodology' of ethnographic fieldwork in elucidating the shape their concerns take.

In working to displace certain prevailing paradigms in the anthropology of time, Ringel finds resonances with an earlier study of a village (Kella),⁵ also in East Germany, and its description of a particular kind of nostalgia (Berdahl 1999;

5. Its ethnographer (Berdahl) subsequently turned her attention to the city of Leipzig, at a point when it had recently lost the bulk of its manufacturing jobs.

Berdahl 2010). This was not nostalgia for something long gone but rather nostalgia for a current and still familiar world, yet one that invited description in idioms of historicization (Berdahl 2010, 41–42, 59).⁶ Everyday food associated with the former German Democratic Republic was now called ‘traditional’. Such expressions of otherwise denied and silenced concerns with the present could also be understood as a longing for a future. One feature of the socialist past had lain in its constant envisioning of future life, which seemingly continued to provide rhetorical force for imagining a different future from that prevailing in the current postsocialist existence. A forever postponed socialist future, Ringel (2016, 399) adds, exists through contemporary concerns with de-industrialization and a neo-liberally orchestrated globalization.

Effectively abandoned by state and federal expertise, the residents of the de-industrializing Hoyerswerda search for fresh narratives (not necessarily radical ones) to make sense of the changes pervading their lives. Through public events such as workshops, social clubs, council meetings, they inform themselves about what is to come in order to know their own expectations and what continuity can be foreseen for them. This is translated into personal terms, for example by anarchists in their concern to maintain a lifestyle based on conscious self-formation, itself a matter of perpetuating an ethics of revolutionary practice. So a particular decision to refuse to consume animal products (Ringel 2018, 161), a move that – when it happened in 2008 – caused culinary dismay in the family, conserved long enacted objections to capitalism.

Residents’ hope for the future has a certain millennial flavour, the ethnographer remarks (Ringel 2018, 165), yet it is not a concern with something new. They do not aspire to displace their everyday present [bar capitalism!] but to maintain it. Change consists of sustaining things so they do *not* disappear. In short, the vision of the alternative future is of one similar to the present but – contrary to other expectations – one that can be sustained, for it offers an alternative to a prevailing prediction about time. That prediction takes the form of an inevitability, the inevitable demise of their city. It is often said that the city has no future. At the beginning of his account, Ringel offers the words of a local singer-songwriter thus: ‘Instead of giving in to *the inevitable flow of time*, he [the singer] claims that we have the power to relate to the future in our own ways’ (Ringel 2018, 2, emphasis added). Whatever residents are trying to perpetuate, and thus keep in continuous life, it can be articulated as though it were a disruption of the otherwise inexorable flow of time itself.

We might ask what kind of time this is. Anything can change, Ringel says, it is what endures that should catch our attention. One way in which people deal with change lies in the idea that they have been living through successive epochs, notably de-industrialization and the vanishing of socialism in the case of Hoyerswerda, and could do so again. To speak more generally of Euro-American ideas about time, successive epochs perceived as interruptions in the ever-changing flow of events are, in

6. People were putting all kinds of things into the past in order to re-appropriate them as the object of memory work, and thus give these ‘East German’ things something of a future. Such items were being re-temporalized, we might say; practices of recuperation she calls them. What was being recuperated was that very familiarity with the still vivid context of people’s everyday lives that had been literally ‘displaced’ by the turn of events.

effect, diverting circumstances along new paths, and could equally be perceived as enhanced moments of time's forward effects. This is because re-channelling the course of events does not compromise that inevitable forward movement: catastrophes do not in themselves disturb assumptions about time's flow. They inevitably involve sequences of events. From this point of view such sequencing seems another version of evolutionary change, a continuity of linear movement from past to present, every temporal horizon imagined as an accumulation of non-repeatable moments. Here, perhaps, we can appreciate the significance of repetition and maintenance work for those city residents who seek an alternative future: they have to contest, precisely because they cannot escape from, those assumptions about time.

Recall the indigenous peoples of the Americas for whom the end of the world has already happened.⁷ Many instances of their desire for a future are expressed as a desire to go 'back' to being indigenous again. In relation to land claims in Brazil (for example) this has been interpreted as, and legal doctrine may demand it is framed thus, claims to continuity with distant peoples. As anthropologists have observed in many similar situations, the requirement to demonstrate continuity invariably comes from the outside. By contrast it is an ordinary, everyday tussle with notions of continuity that seems to characterize Hoyerswerda residents' kind of 'back to the future'. The German cultivation of the ethical self that entailed changing diet literally embodied a political protest that had to be kept alive. If, from another perspective, it recalls the way certain people, for example from Latin America or the Amazon (Roberts 2012; Kelly 2011), may change their bodies through the social relations they cultivate, a debate with continuity is hardly the focus of the latter's efforts. Rather, people's associations literally alter their 'race', an explicit expectation of discontinuity. (Better put, neither continuity nor discontinuity is the issue.) Do those advocating being indigenous again follow a similar course: have they already re-made their bodies? If we were in the Pacific, in parts of Papua New Guinea, say, we might be tempted to add that people can also alter the time they are in.

The Pacific

Papua New Guineans often joke that they are the world's end. It is the 'last place',⁸ they say, meaning in this case the furthest you can go, a phrase that echoes the title of Berdahl's village study, *Where the World Ended*, referring to its peripheral location at the boundary of the former GDR. Somewhat sardonically, Papua New Guineans are gesturing to what they see as an outsider's view of them. More to the point, ordinary people use the phrase to draw attention to how far they are these days from sources of

7. The ends of the world occasioned by the European expansion of the sixteenth century 'continue to take place at different scales, in several ... parts of the planet ... as if the end of the world were a truly fractal event, indefinitely reproduced' (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017 [2014], 105, emphasis removed).

8. *Las ples* in what has become one of its official languages, Pidgin (Neo-Melanesian); it is also a phrase convicts use of prison (Reed 2003), evoking others uses, for example to refer to a homestead particularly hidden away.

power. Colonization and postcolonial governments have dislodged any sense of their being at the centre of things. Like socialism in East Germany, for the older generation colonialism came and went in a lifetime.

Communities appear remote when, in times of emergency, communications and transport networks fail them. The 2015 El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) event, exacerbated by climate change, led to a drought in this tropical country; unprecedented in scale, it devastated the horticultural basis of many people's livelihood, their staple root crops (notably sweet potato, taro, yam) (Jorgensen 2016). Such devastation brought home the botanical dependence of these plants on continuous cultivation. Like the banana and sugar cane people also grow, they are propagated from cuttings: one plant is generated directly from another living plant. In fact we now know that (apart from sweet potato) people have kept these crops in continuous cultivation for 7000 years – in global terms, far from a last place, Papua New Guinea was a significant centre of plant 'domestication'. Those plants also tell us something else about time, and the continuity we may inadvertently read into it, on which I shall enlarge before returning to the world turned upside down first by colonization and then by de-colonization.

As far as the tubers, corms and fruits of yams, taro, banana, are concerned, pre-historic plant selection encouraged starch content, which worked in favour of sterile cultivars (Denham 2017, 42–43). Their continuous propagation would seem a perfect image of time's flow. Generations emerge out of each other. In yam growing areas, for example, the yam's life-cycle may be explicitly calibrated with that of persons, as Rio (2007) describes of the Vanuatuan island of Ambrym, or Harrison (1982) of Avatip in lowland Papua New Guinea. Thus, the planting of a yam may be 'likened with the burial of a dead father. It is the beginning of a life course, which begins with the "mother place", symbolized in gardening by the mound [of earth] that "swells up" over the yam' (Rio 2007, 114). Apparently fitting those European notions of sequence that point to the growth and decay of living beings, theirs seems a vivid experience of continuity, and time's flow seems only qualified by the absence of incremental change and 'development' in a modern sense. If Papua New Guineans have indeed been cultivating these same crops for millennia, does this not point to a timeless existence, just as an Australian explorer in the 1930s epitomized the interior of Papua New Guinea as *The Land That Time Forgot* (Leahy and Crain 1937)?⁹ The indigenous mindset this seemed to imply fuelled colonial attempts at development.

Timelessness could not, in fact, have been further from the reality of how the people encountered by the explorer thought about things. Time appeared in the form of radical division. Consider the two species of yams grown in Avatip and how people distinguish them as elder and younger brother, analogous with the adjacency of the generations between persons. 'Time', Harrison (1982, 155) writes, 'always remains an integral part of the relationship between them'. Yet while younger follows

9. However, unlike the sometime evocation of 'last place', no switching of perspectives is intended. The 'explorer' was from a world where, *through time*, civilization had evolved and modernity come to fruition, and he was bringing it with him. Had he spoken that way, he would no doubt have regarded himself as encountering a culture his advent had put into the past.

elder, it is the pairing that is recursive; after younger comes not an even younger brother but a reiteration of the original pair, starting with elder brother again.¹⁰ Within each pair, the yams must be kept scrupulously separate, for ‘Avatip time concepts revolve around the idea of an antagonism between senior and junior, elder and younger. I think one could summarize them [the concepts] as the notion of a continual process of violent displacement of the one by the other’ (Harrison 1982, 158).

Old Melanesia was a world full of abrupt transformations, former worlds discarded, different epochs brought into existence.¹¹ And this was true at all scales of life, from cosmic renewal brought about through cult performance to the elaborate engagement of persons in the making of new persons (as through marriage and initiation protocols) to the disposal of what we would call the dead who had to be rendered properly dead in order for the living to flourish. None of these things happened autonomously.¹² Nothing grew by itself or died by itself: everything was the result of people’s action, whether the people involved were themselves living, dead or in spirit form. Above all, the plants on which they depended would not come into fruition without the proper relations between persons, and between persons and spirits, being in place. People did not wait for time’s flow to do the job: time did not flow – an old time had to be cut away for a new time to take its place.

In European terms, vegetative by contrast with sexual, reproduction is often depicted as a continuous process, yet in the case of these cultivated crops such a description would conceal an essential discontinuity. The plant does not normally propagate itself. For the next generation to flourish, someone must kill the tuber or fruit bearing body: the food-grower does this by severing its offspring from it. Generational terms are used especially of taro and yams, where the portion to be planted ceases to be a child of the previous generation and becomes a parent of the new. Ambrym people, who bury both cut-up yams and whole tubers, thus turn the ‘sons’ of previous father-yams into new ‘fathers’; as the next generation becomes strong underground, the now rotting father tuber must be dug out so as not to contaminate his own offspring (Rio 2007, 115). This cultivation practice is but one of many versions, but it is my surmise that they generally endorsed an episodic sense of change.¹³ Time was in the actions people took.

10. Over the seasonal cycle, ‘when the ‘younger brother’ yams, the year’s last yam crop, are on their way into the village [from the bush gardens,] . . . the ‘elder brother’ yams are about to leave the village . . . [for planting in] the new year’s river gardens’ (Harrison 1982, 157–158). (The latter reference to elder brother yams is to the material put aside for planting from the earlier harvest; cultivating the two kinds of yams in separate gardens keeps a division between them, and keeps them from ‘fighting’.) The same pairing structures all manner of social relations.

11. Hirsch (2007, 285–286) discusses the importance of the concept of epoch: how Melanesians will ‘acknowledge they are now in a different ‘time’, a different epoch – often phrased as ‘new time’.

12. Thus, for some, forgetting the dead entailed deliberate attention to ‘finishing’ them; the classic account is Battaglia (1990); see Foster (1995).

13. I avoid the argument about what is imported into the description by the very Euro-American conceptualization of ‘time’ as some kind of space. On episodic by contrast with evolutionary views of change, see Robbins (2007, 12) and Strathern (2019, 63–64). Robbins’ paper is a critique of the ‘continuity thinking’ he finds prevalent in (Euro-American) anthropology, himself being interested in the similarities between the temporal ruptures of Christian conversion and millennial imaginings.

Papua New Guineans told themselves stories of past epochs when things were radically and drastically different from now. If people constantly recreated anything, it was the way they severed themselves off from one another to produce the conditions of a flourishing life. Only once the dead were properly detached from the living would their blessings come. Their ancestors had lived in a present with its evident future potential, that is, today's people: the people alive now were the cuttings or offshoots of that previous potential, which they brought into their own present so they too could be regenerators of a new future. The living yam was buried to be made to live again. In short, everyday effort was directed less to sustaining continuity with the past than to bringing about 'new' (ever generative) presents. The affirmation of that possibility lay in the break between previous (old) and present (new) acts. To make a new person in a new time was to re-make the present.

This is not without interest for a Euro-American perspective on history. The twentieth century colonizers of interior (highland) Papua New Guinea found people by and large remarkably ready to change everything about themselves and participate in the process of pacification. As Pickles (2019, 24) observes, 'people were in large part cooperating in attempts at "civilization"'. What the Australian incomers may not have realized is the extent to which their success in turning things upside down was due to indigenes' adeptness at handling new situations. Had they known, government officials and others might have presented their extravagant promises about a new future rather differently. Instead, intent on taking charge, they practically promised a new world. But they got the relationship between the present and the future wrong. The colonizers thought of the country gradually, incrementally, moving to a developed future still far in the distance, of which schools and roads would be the foundation, while exhorting the people – whom they saw as stuck in the past – to observe the 'new law'. People themselves seem to have understood a new law as a new epoch. It had already come – it was already here! They had no problem about radical change, or about becoming new people. But then almost nothing happened – there was no transformation. The immense frustration that followed, all the promises made to them that were not being kept, eventually transformed a relatively peaceful process of colonization into a fraught national situation, including conflicts erroneously labelled tribal fighting, which led to international intervention and the structural adjustments that – with hindsight of time's flow – inevitably turned a potentially flourishing, newly independent Papua New Guinea into a 'failed state'.

An End

If a conventional model of time flowing informs us that the present comes from the past and the future from the present, I have described some European city dwellers who have complicated this sequence in interesting ways. For certain residents of Hoyerswerda, the one thing their new world must not be is ever more scaled-up present-day disorientation. I have also described people from the Melanesian Pacific whose ancestors never thought there was such a thing as time that flowed:

life was always punctuated by abrupt change, less as something done to them and more as something that they worked to bring about. Across these two sets of circumstances, to follow Stengers' (2011, 59) idiom, the premises on which people act reveal a radical divergence. And 'divergence' would make bridge-building a challenging accommodation of real-world predicaments if we could not acknowledge the obvious: interaction does not need to proceed out of continuity of experience, and does not need to presuppose similarity as its only rationale.

Time as bridge-builder. It seems counter-intuitive to suggest that as the anthropologist's own world changes, he or she may get closer to past studies. Yet, in some matters at least,¹⁴ I have long had the impression that our understanding of so-called 'traditional' societies first studied many years ago have been waiting for the anthropologist's world to catch up. If anthropologists can grasp that for themselves, it may be a step towards grasping what their diverse interlocutors are also saying. Present day Amerindians wanting to be indigenous again are perhaps better understood as a figuration of the future, not as a remnant of the past (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017 [2014], 123, after Krøijer).

The frontier of anthropological study here is radicalizing our notions of what is of contemporary relevance. As Stengers observes in another context, 'we must give the present the power to *resist the past*. This also means *revitalizing the past*, giving it the power to escape its classification as a part of the progressive history that leads to "us".'¹⁵ The point applies to Social Anthropology as such. What was observed more than 25 years ago has, if anything, grown more true, that anthropology is too often blind to the historiographic diversity by which it reflects on its own traditions as though that were a simple matter of bringing the past into the present. These are Stolcke's (1993) words. As a postscript to her comment, I just add that, whatever sense of crisis has brought it on, anthropology has found new dynamism in its attention to quite diverse apprehensions of future-making.

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14. To give one example from the Papua New Guinean Highlands. Mid-twentieth century debates about dispute settlement in societies indigenously lacking centralized administration had to describe mechanisms that seemed alien to the then Australian-British judicial system with its clear distinction between criminal and civil law. Examples included forms of mediation between disputing parties, or the compensation of parties injured through assault or death. By the late twentieth century, something analogous to these practices had become formalized, at least in the British judicial system, namely the importance of mediation in domestic matters, and an increasing attention to victims in criminal cases. Those indigenous practices now start looking far less alien, and would require a different kind of approach from today's ethnographer. In short, the immediate present of an ethnographer may be a less illuminating horizon than one still in the future.

15. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro's (2017 [2014], 150) translation (and emphasis) from Stengers' (2013) manifesto.

of St Andrews). Some of the ideas were first aired at a lecture in honour of Daphne Berdahl at the University of Minnesota in 2017, and I appreciate the stimulus of that occasion; Felix Ringel offered some very apposite comments.

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About the Author

Marilyn Strathern is Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology, and Life Fellow of Girton College, Cambridge University, and Honorary Life President of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (ASA). She had the good fortune to begin her research career in Papua New Guinea, which led to work, among other things, on law, kinship and gender relations. In the UK she subsequently became involved with anthropological approaches to the new reproductive technologies, intellectual property and audit cultures. She is probably best known for *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), a critique of anthropological theories of society applied to Melanesia, which she pairs with *After Nature* (1992), a comment on the cultural revolution at home. Her more recent book, *Before and After Gender* (2016), is also one of her first, unpublished since the early 1970s. Her first departmental position was at the University of Manchester, UK. She is a Fellow of the British Academy (FBA), and received a national honour (DBE) in 2001; she was awarded the International Balzan Prize for Social Anthropology in 2018.