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Chapter 11

Balance, malleability and anthropology: historical contexts

Chris Millard

The conference that first incubated contributions to this collection was held at the University of Exeter over two days in June 2016 and coincided with the national referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union. On Friday morning, the irony of speaking about histories of 'balance' as the country proceeded to plumb some of the most polarized depths in recent memory did not pass unremarked. Some months previously, an invitation had been sent to potential speakers, giving some suggestions and guidance regarding the focus and structure of the contributions. The panel that I was on was intended to 'help set up many of the themes taken up in the rest of the conference', and panel members were encouraged to highlight 'the role of institutions and organisations in the construction of the balanced self' and to go beyond ideas of 'individual agency'. This was initially a welcome suggestion: charting the 'construction of the self' in various ways remains at the core of my research interests. The idea that human beings are embedded in structures of thought, institutions and practices – historical horizons of possibility – is one of my grounding assumptions in the history of medicine.

After some reflection, however, the request to provide a reflexive springboard or foundation for the rest of the conference, a role that I am usually pleased to perform, provoked some disquiet. What caused me to pause were the following questions: If this idea of a constructed selfhood is to be a conceptual foundation, then what are *its* foundations? Where am I standing? More precisely, what am I standing on, or pushing off from? Where does the notion that the 'balanced self' is just one possible, historically and institutionally specific way of being human come from?

As the contributions have shown, there are many kinds of balanced personhood. They relate to specific local conditions, specific authoritative discourses, prescribed or proscribed practices, institutions or ideas. But it is important to differentiate between these different conceptions of balance, and a more basic set of assumptions that lies beneath them. I now want to look more broadly at the foundation we are standing upon when speaking of different ‘balanced selves’ at all. This concluding chapter, then, deals with intellectual and conceptual foundations, but we must pay attention to the source basis – and its biases – for understanding. One of the common threads here is that humans’ selves are ripe for intervention and remaking, that they can be worked on, balanced, rebalanced and reconfigured. But there is another sense that I want to explore. All these accounts presume that the changing notions of balance correspond to the possibilities available in time, in culture, in context. They are based, in short on an idea that human beings are malleable, and that this malleability is shaped in historically and culturally specific ways.

One source for the idea that one’s human-ness is constructible and malleable is that it is related to environments, institutions, and local, particular factors. It upon this malleable humanity that we draw when talking of constructing an historically, environmentally specific ‘balanced human’. The term ‘malleable humanity’ comes from Margaret Mead’s controversial anthropological classic *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928). This signposts the area that I want to explore. How far are the malleable, plastic humans that populate social constructivist studies rooted in a specific, flourishing moment in twentieth-century anthropology? My sources here are anthropological texts, collected through extensive fieldwork, interviewing, transcription and translation of interviews – practices that are not neutral or free of power dynamics.¹ This anthropological moment is associated with three names above all: Margaret Mead, Bronislaw Malinowski and Franz Boas. I want to explore the history of anthropology and its related assumptions about human plasticity. This will help reflections upon how we might build and

critique notions of balanced humans. Finally, I hope to lay out some of the politics of this and to historicise the discussion: Why is this happening now? Why, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, might malleable humanity become more visible? An awareness of the contingency and specificity of our methodological tools brings our own present into focus – a particular present in which we wield these tools, and which bounds the histories we are able to produce.

Plastic human nature and anthropology

‘Culture’ is the most important concept in anthropology. The meaning of this word – as used in anthropology – shifted around the turn of the twentieth century, from culture as a universal measurement of civilization, to culture describing a specific local environment. Anthropologist Philippe Descola noted recently in his important book *Beyond Nature and Culture* that one of the most influential formulations of the word ‘culture’ comes from Edward B. Tylor in 1871 (an important Victorian anthropologist). Descola argues that Tylor’s formulation is so influential that it is ‘traditionally regarded, so to speak as the birth certificate of modern anthropology... Here, culture is not distinguished from civilization... This was the view adopted by the evolutionary anthropologists of the last third of the nineteenth century. It accepts the possibility and necessity of comparison between societies arranged in order of their cultural institutions, which are more or less elaborated expressions of a universal human tendency’²

Culture here functions as a measuring stick, a universal scale. In less technical prose, Anna Green and Kathleen Troup argue that according to this notion: ‘[s]ocieties and cultures were slotted into appropriate stages along the path of human development’. Naturally enough, ‘the institutions and values of Europe were the apotheosis’.³ Thus culture operates as a scorecard for various societies, enabling anthropologists to position them on the road towards Western Europe – the final destination and the epitome of ‘culture’ in this sense. At the dawn of the

twentieth century, however, this idea of culture began to be displaced by another concept under the same term. As Descola writes: 'The strictly anthropological concept of culture did not appear until later. It was only at the turn of the twentieth century, in the ethnographic work of Franz Boas, that there emerged the idea that each people constitutes a unique and coherent configuration of material and intellectual features'.⁴ Culture as a universal measurement is replaced by a sense of culture as an autonomous, coherent whole, as something to be studied in its specificity.

Heinrich Rickert (1863-1936), a leading neo-Kantian philosopher of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is seen by Descola as a prominent source of this notion of 'culture' later to be taken up by Boas, Malinowski, Mead and others. Although Rickert did classify the study of 'primitive peoples' as belonging to the natural sciences, his broad conception of culture functioned to 'carve out the space in which twentieth century anthropology would be able to operate. It would be a study of cultural realities, rather than natural realities.' Culture and nature are divided here in 'an implacable epistemological separation' that is not innate or inherent, but powerful nevertheless.⁵

This separation endures until the late twentieth century. Anthropologist Bernard S. Cohn, surveying anthropological practice in 1980, argues that the earlier idea of 'culture' rests on assumed biological determinants of human culture and society'. Biology is clearly associated with the notion of culture-as-measuring-stick. He further claims that this idea 'throws out... the one central fact that anthropology has discovered – people lead meaningful lives, and that these meanings can only be discovered within the context of those lives, it cannot be imputed to them on the basis of some previously established ideas about the biological or psychological makeup of people.'⁶ The focus of this twentieth-century anthropological culture concept is focused upon contextual meaning, without necessitating an overarching comparison. So how does this shift happen in anthropology, and how does this relate to history? Here I want to deal specifically with

how this notion of context-specific ‘malleable humanity’ begins to influence historians – particularly ‘social constructionist’ historians.

Bronislaw Malinowski’s anthropological classic *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) is a watershed for anthropology. Malinowski’s approach to fieldwork demands that the ethnographer is fully immersed in the ‘life of the native’ and not just working through paid informants and sitting on the verandah of the mission station. Thus, according to Vincent Debaene’s lucid study of French anthropology, the anthropologist’s aim is to ‘immerse himself, to soak up another culture, to “live from the inside” the experience of the “native”’. Further, this constitutes a ‘privileging of the personal, concrete and psychological aspects of field experiences.’⁷ This immersive fieldwork technique is not to everyone’s taste. As the prominent anatomist and Egyptologist Grafton Elliott Smith rather acidly observes, he cannot understand why ‘the sole method of studying mankind is to sit on a Melanesian island for a couple of years and listen to the gossip of the villagers’.⁸

As well as bringing the notion of ‘experience’ to the fore (which will later provoke questions of whose experience is *able* to be foregrounded), this method allows Malinowski to sketch out the ways in which he believes culture impacts one’s core personhood:

‘their mental states receive a certain stamp, become stereotyped by the institutions in which they live, by the influence of tradition and folk-lore, by the very vehicle of thought, that is by language. The social and cultural environment in which they move forces them to think and feel in a definite manner. Thus, a man who lives in a polyandrous community cannot experience the same feelings of jealousy, as a strict monogynist, though he might have the elements of them.’⁹

Here is an idea of a radically plastic selfhood (or perhaps ‘pre-self’), which is rooted in a specific kind of twentieth-century anthropology, and grows out of a particular conceptual opposition between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. It is important to remember that the anthropological

fieldwork method allows Malinowski to *ventriloquize* rather than reveal this experience of the man in the polyandrous community. It is Malinowski who has the (imperial) power of speech, argumentation, editing, publication, and so on. It is *his* reading and writing of the situation that is privileged, even as he attempts to centre his subject. However, his metaphor of the ‘stamp’ here implies that there is some universal blank slate on which our personhood materializes; it also establishes and foregrounds a tight relationship between what it is possible to think, and the constraints and possibilities of language. Most importantly (for we shall deal with the history of the emotions a little later), Malinowski argues that although there might be elements of feelings that are common across cultures, one cannot experience emotions such as jealousy in the same way in different cultures.

Six year later, in 1928, Margaret Mead celebrates the manifold differences in the process of adolescence (‘coming of age’) between North America and Samoa. Mead writes that ‘neither race nor common humanity can be held responsible for many of the forms which even such basic emotions as love and fear and anger take under different social conditions.’ But straight from this disavowal of common humanity, she deploys something universal, writing of ‘babies who have as yet no civilization to shape their malleable humanity.’¹⁰ In fact a fuller quotation bears analysis:

‘With such an attitude towards human nature the anthropologist listened to the current comment upon adolescence. He heard attitudes which seemed to him dependent upon social environment... ascribed to a period of physical development. And on the basis of his knowledge of the determinism of culture, of the plasticity of human beings, he doubted.’¹¹

As Roger Smith has noted, ‘Mead argued with her vivid example [Samoa fieldwork] that culture rather than fixed biological determinants control a child’s development.’ Indeed Smith quotes Mead as arguing that ‘human nature is almost unbelievably malleable, responding

accurately and contrastingly to contrasting cultural conditions.’¹² The passage from Mead focuses upon adolescence. This idea of particularly significant transitional periods in the human life-course is present in other discussions in the early twentieth-century around physiology, adaptation, evolution and stress. In these discussions, the transitions (whether menopause, adolescence or another time of physiological change) had the potential to impair future adaptability, future malleability.

It is clear that anthropological discussions of nature/culture are not the only place that visions of malleable personhood emerge. One link between evolutionary thought and anthropological discussion can be seen in the work of W.H.R. Rivers, a doctor trained in physiological and psychological medicine who embarked (on something of a whim) on the Cambridge Expedition to the Torres Strait; he later did ethnographic work in India and the Solomon Islands.¹³ It is as psychiatrist to First World War poet Siegfried Sassoon that Rivers is best known, and Rivers’ evidence to the War Office Committee on the Problem of ‘Shell-Shock’ shows how his work is explicitly concerned with adaptation, specifically with the effects of being unable to adapt to circumstances. He argues that ‘Every animal has a natural reaction to danger... and man’s is manipulation of such a kind as to get him out of the dangerous situation... If he cannot have that, or if it is restricted in any way, you have a prominent condition for the occurrence of neurosis’.¹⁴ Rivers, both psychiatrist and anthropologist, explicitly roots the problem of war neurosis in the frustration of evolutionary urges to adapt to situations.

Mead is mentored in her anthropological endeavours by Franz Boas, who writes an appreciative foreword to *Coming of Age in Samoa*. He claims ‘much of what we ascribe to human nature is no more than a reaction to the restraints put upon us by our civilization.’¹⁵ Boas, like Malinowski and Mead, ascribes special significance to language, and the way it influences thought. In 1920, he argues that ‘the categories of language compel us to see the world arranged in certain definite conceptual groups which... impose themselves upon the form of our

thoughts.’¹⁶ This approach to language in Boas and Malinowski, drawing out its formative influence on thought, is characteristic of much social constructivist history. Boas is also clear that he tries to treat these cultures as independent and coherent, arguing that ‘on the whole the unique historical character of cultural growth in each area stands out as a salient element in the history of cultural development’.¹⁷

I am not arguing that the malleability of human nature is simply or exclusively an anthropological invention. We find it in a number of places in the early-mid twentieth century, from the abovementioned discussions of adaptation and evolution, to the varied concepts of psychoanalysis, where early experiences are said to mould future character and pathology to an enormous extent. This emerges very clearly in child guidance.¹⁸ It is also evident in some strands of sociology – even as part of those ideas that deploy concepts of culture as a measure of civilization.¹⁹

What I am arguing instead, is that an important and influential strand of this idea comes out of anthropology, as well as psychoanalysis. The similarities are visible to authors at the time. For example, Boas explicitly tackles this similarity between his ideas and those of Freud:

‘It is certainly true that the influence of impressions received during the first few years of life have been entirely underestimated and that the social behavior of man depends to a great extent upon the earliest habits which are established before time when connected memory begins, and that many so-called racial or hereditary traits are to be considered rather as of early exposure to a certain form of social conditions. Most these habits do not rise into consciousness and are, therefore, broken with difficulty only. Much of the difference in the behavior of adult male and female may go back to this cause.’²⁰

The links between psychoanalysis and ethnology/anthropology are also legion. Rivers is another reference point here, heavily influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis and the practice of

anthropology. At the end of his enormously influential history of European human sciences, *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault argues that:

‘we can understand why psychoanalysis and ethnology should have been constituted in confrontation, in a fundamental correlation: since [Freud’s 1913 work] *Totem and Taboo*, the establishment of a common field for these two, the possibility of a discourse that could move from one to the other without discontinuity’.²¹

So perhaps the roots of this malleability cannot fully be grasped without probing the depths of psychoanalysis and evolutionary stress theory too, although I can only deal with anthropology here. However, under the influence of the anthropological output of Malinowski, Boas and Mead, plasticity provides a significant intellectual platform, foregrounding a vision of human nature that is fundamentally moulded by circumstance.

I have written elsewhere about the relationship between another prominent Foucauldian philosopher (Ian Hacking), the history of the self, and a particular twentieth-century flourishing of anthropology.²² Vast numbers of historians have built upon the idea that one’s self is malleable, constructible and fundamentally related to material and intellectual conditions. But the idea that the self is malleable *at all* seems to escape investigation. This idea – which is progressive, inclusive and open – falls into the category that Hayden White calls ‘precritical’ when talking of historical works: ‘they contain a deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic in nature, and which serves as a precritically accepted paradigm of what a distinctively “historical” explanation should be.’²³ Thus in the same way nineteenth-century anthropology is animated by the idea of culture as a yardstick of progress, ‘Boasian culturalism’ (to use the sometimes pejorative shorthand) inverts the whole *idea* of this hierarchy. It does not invert the hierarchy itself (reversing the positions on the scale) but inverts the idea: from a vertical conception of difference to a horizontal one. This horizontal conception of

culture, this cultural relativism is the ‘deep structural content’ of twentieth-century anthropology and post-structuralist history. Human nature here is malleable and the differences are non-hierarchical. Thus far I have only gestured at ways in which history has been influenced by anthropology. The following section puts flesh on those bones.

Anthropology and histories of balance

Simon Susen has written a useful if rather jargon-heavy survey of the *Postmodern Turn in the Social Sciences*. He argues that according to this turn: ‘[i]f there is anything essential about culture, it is its normalizing capacity to make human actors treat socially contingent parameters of validity as naturally given laws of facticity.’ In other words: one of the things that culture seems to do in all cases is to present the various rules and regulations that constitute it as though they are natural givens. Susen notes that ‘anthropology teaches us that there is no essence to the human condition, apart from people’s dependence upon culturally variable arrangements, constellations and interpretations. In other words, social history constitutes an ensemble of constantly developing – and, thus, spatiotemporally contingent – life forms.’²⁴ There are two points to note. One is that the essential unifying principle of the concept of ‘culture’, according to ‘anthropology’, is that it is dis-unified and non-essential in every other way. The other point is the telling slippage from ‘anthropology teaches us...’ to ‘social history constitutes...’ This link between social history and anthropology is precisely what I am trying to tease out.

In Stuart Sim’s *Irony and Crisis: A Critical History of Postmodern Culture* he locates an important battle within the discipline of history in an exchange in the influential historical journal *Past and Present* in the early 1990s. This debate begins with Lawrence Stone (social historian of the early modern family) penning an attack on what he calls ‘post-modernism’: he views it as an ‘ever-narrowing trap’ and wonders ‘if history might be on the way to becoming an endangered species’.²⁵ Stone isolates three strands of this ‘trap’: Derridean linguistics and

deconstruction, New Historicism and contextualism, and (usefully for this conclusion) what he calls ‘cultural and symbolic anthropology’.

Stone’s disdain for deconstruction is obvious as he directs readers to an article that has performed a ‘damaging exposure of the many logical flaws in this form of argument’. New Historicism fares slightly better: ‘at first sight a welcome return to the study of the text in its... context’; it ultimately comes unstuck because, according to Stone, it ‘treats political, institutional and social practices as “cultural scripts”, or discursive sets of symbolic systems or codes’. Quite why this is so contemptible is not made explicit by Stone. However, when he comes to symbolic anthropology, he has some much kinder words, calling it:

‘at first enormously liberating and finally rather threatening [it] comes from the influence of cultural and symbolic anthropology as developed by a brilliant group of scholars headed by Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, Mary Douglas and others. Their work has influenced many of the best historians of the last decade’.²⁶

There is clearly something valuable that Stone discerns in this anthropology, a productive cross-pollination of ideas. It also shows how ‘postmodernism’ (at least in part) is seen to grow out of anthropology. Another, more extended rearguard action against ‘postmodernism’ is penned by Richard J. Evans in his *In Defence of History* (1997). He glosses this *Past and Present* debate, and engages with Catriona Kelly’s response to Stone, citing her argument that historians can adopt ‘an aggressive attitude’ to the sources, focusing on ‘secondary layers of meaning’ and ‘reading against the grain’.²⁷

Part of Evans’ argument in *In Defence of History* is that historians already do ‘read against the grain’ (which has somehow become conflated with whatever it is ‘postmodernists’ do), and this reading practice comes from a now familiar source: ‘The real question at issue here is *what enables us* to read a source “against the grain”, and here theory does indeed come in.’²⁸

His first example is anthropological theory developed in the study of twentieth-century rural Africa, used by Keith Thomas to explore early modern European witchcraft.²⁹

This does not, of course, make Keith Thomas a ‘postmodernist’. However, it highlights the exchange between social history and anthropology more generally. It shows how practices that are seen as part of ‘postmodernism’ in the 1990s are influenced by practices lifted from anthropology in the 1980s. Bernard Cohn sees deep connections between history and anthropology - the former making difference over time intelligible, the latter doing the same for space. He argues that they ‘have a common subject matter, “otherness”... one field constructs and studies “otherness” in space, the other in time. Both fields have a concern with text and context. Both aim, whatever else they do, at explicating the meaning of actions of people rooted in one time and place, to persons in another.’³⁰ Clearly anthropological ideas have been influential more generally. Even harsh critics of ‘Boasian culturalism’, such as Derek Freeman, admit as much: Freeman quotes an historian of American anthropology, who characterized such ‘culturalism’ as ‘fundamental to all of American social science’ as long ago as 1973.³¹

The links between poststructuralist and postmodernist history are clear. One effect of this traffic between disciplines is to bring to the fore ideas of *selfhood* as radically malleable. As Cohn argues: ‘the reconceptualization of culture, not as a set of social or economic elements, but as a “pattern” of *psychological* elements... hence the concern with the relationship between culture and personality. What was authentically cultural was then psychological, rooted in personality’.³² Here we see concerns with selfhood, personality, history, culture, ethnology and psychoanalysis all present. Malleable selfhood and anthropology (along with psychoanalysis) are distinctively twentieth-century phenomena in the humanities.

Elwin Hofman has recently laid out ‘How to do the history of the self’, and rightly cautions against assuming that a concept as broad as the self has only one meaning. Eight are mentioned, including, at number two in the list: ‘the cultural conception of the individual’. Two

of the three scholars referenced are Clifford Geertz and Marcel Mauss.³³ Hofman argues that a ‘sense of a stable self has always been disrupted by discourses of flexibility and malleability.’³⁴ This may well be true, but here we are charting a particular instance of instability as a product of a particular resonance between history and anthropology at a certain time. In fact, in the early twentieth-century, myriad stress researchers (the most famous of whom is Walter Cannon) are building a conception of human beings as balanced and stabilized through concepts of homeostasis and research into the autonomic nervous system.³⁵ At a particular point in time, stability and malleability circulate in different registers.

Hofman buttresses his claim by citing Stephen Greenblatt’s work on *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. Greenblatt’s work, which I briefly discuss elsewhere,³⁶ does claim to find a malleable sense of self in the Renaissance. However, he explicitly builds this claim on the work of twentieth-century anthropologists: Paul Rabinow, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas among others; he explicitly wants to ‘practice a more cultural or anthropological criticism’.³⁷ The fact that he reads malleable selfhood through Geertz, Turner et al. means that he risks projecting that selfhood onto the Renaissance as much as he is able to find it there.

Anthropology is not the *only* source of this idea of ‘malleable humanity’, but it is an influential one. Post-modern, post-structuralist, cultural historians spend much time unpicking the assumptions and contexts of their actors, and often leave their own untouched – this is why I am trying to ‘pick at’ the way a particular form of anthropology is an unacknowledged foundation, part of a ‘deep structural content’, of constructivist history. There is a strong argument here that to be intellectually consistent, we must unpick our assumptions, just as we uncover those of people in the past.

Many of the contributions in this volume focus upon an individualization of the responsibility for balance. Three examples will illustrate the point tolerably – if not comprehensively. Jane Hand’s work on obesity visualization shows how ‘balanced selves’ are

bound up with notions of self-regulating consumers. This has a sharp political dimension, as ‘selves’ correspond to dominant economic ideologies. Hand argues – persuasively – that the ‘individualisation of risk in this period enabled the state to reframe individuals as a new type of health citizen incorporated into a balanced conception of rights and responsibilities... persuading the individual to act as a self-conscious and self-regulated consumer... establishing a new social contract with the state.’ Ayesha Nathoo’s chapter carves out a space for ‘assessment of the consequences of teaching individuals to cultivate relaxed, balanced selves.’ Again, individualization and self-cultivation are central. Political concerns emerge, but the politics of the methodological insight that enables us to see selfhood as adaptable are less visible. Layering this analysis with an awareness of *its own specificity* enriches the narrative further. Not simply that it is possible because of a particular set of methodological tools, used in the present, but that this analysis of obesity and public health is itself politically charged in the context of further welfare retrenchment, stigmatization of claimants, and a further retreat of the state from responsibility for health.

Nicos Kefalas’ argument about the rise of self-care is similarly charged with contemporary relevance and he talks explicitly about the embrace of ‘the notion of self-reflective, self-governing individualism’ and links it to ideas of ‘efficiency’. The contemporary relevance of this – to us *now* in 2018 – is left largely unsaid. Awareness of the contingency of the methodological tools we wield in the present, in pursuit of present objectives, according to our present resources, capacities and privileges, can bring this to the forefront of our awareness. Different conceptions of balance are parsed through a historically-specific idea of malleable humanity: this awareness prompts an acknowledgement that *we are using these particular tools in a particular present*. Many of the contributions focus upon how ‘balance’ transforms through reference to a ‘consumer’. The visibility of this frame of reference – humans as autonomous, self-regulating, competitive, market-driven beings – is part of an economic commonsense that is

creaking and breaking apart *as we write these histories*. Historians are always writing about their present context even as they write about the past. The different conceptions of balance and different ideas of selfhood could be deepened and made richer by an acknowledgement that they are based in a particular reading of anthropology – a particular mixture of self-understandings, or changing self-understandings that also need to become reflexive. When we acknowledge the present that bounds us, it not only helps to uncover the gaps or blind spots in one's analytical frameworks, but it makes clear the contemporary political freight carried by all histories.

There is another specific reason why we should nurture this awareness of our methodological tools. Broadly speaking, what might be called the 'culturalism' or 'malleable humanity' thesis has come under attack from those who have wish to give biology a greater role as a motive force for culture and behaviour. This concern is not new, as one such biological argument shadows Mead's argument above. Mead sets her hypothetical anthropologist up as doubting the role of 'physical development' that is thought to provoke the behaviour of adolescents.

What I am instead arguing is that a certain strand of thinking about malleability becomes influential and intertwined with certain philosophical approaches in the history of medicine and wider medical humanities. Cohn describes a certain kind of anthropological history, reading it explicitly against ideas of 'nature':

'All culture is constructed. It is the product of human thought. This product may over time become fixed ways of doing things. It may also be changed. Since culture is always being constituted and constructed, so it is also always being transformed. Cultures and societies are not natural objects. It is only through culture that we construct nature, not the other way around.'³⁸

This is very much the language of the early 'postmodern' historians, speaking of the 'social construction' or 'cultural construction' of race or gender in the past.

Why now? The return of biology

Having established that a strand of ‘postmodern’ or ‘poststructural’ thinking draws upon insights from twentieth-century anthropology, we might ask whether it remains legitimate to project these twentieth-century insights back further into the past. I have answered this question in the negative elsewhere: I do not think it particularly good history to assume that selfhood in the past is the same as selfhood in the twentieth century. This is for the same reasons that I do not think it legitimate to diagnose medieval saints as anorexic, or as experiencing migraines. These concepts and categories are the product of certain times and places, and a significant part of their reality concerns how people understood themselves in relation to these categories. If the categories did not exist, I do not see how the people in the past could meaningfully inhabit those diagnoses. Others have made this point eloquently, with varying degrees of forcefulness.³⁹ The projection of the categories of one period of time onto the humans of another period flattens and collapses how these people lived, acted and understood themselves. Thus we can say (of ‘balance’ specifically) that its meaning and political purchase is fundamentally variable, and to collapse into one the malleability of cultural anthropology, the dynamic balance of the autonomic nervous system, or the balance of various neurotransmitters is to obscure much of their specific, contextual resonance and meaning.

My point here is to ask a different question: how is it that this anthropological foundation becomes apparent now? What is it about our contemporary world that makes this position possible? The answer might be summed up as ‘the return of biology’⁴⁰ to the social sciences, although it never really went away. People throughout history have had varying understandings about the material of their bodies, and the ways in which their natures are essential, fixed, flexible, rigid or otherwise. What has changed in the early twenty-first century is that new understandings of biology have come roaring back into the academic humanities, bringing with

them new opportunities, risks and consequences. This is why the anthropological, ‘culturalist’ basis of post-structuralism has been thrown into relief. The rest of this section is a brief sketch of one way this has happened, and why I want to defend the idea of malleable humanity. This defence, however, must be in full knowledge of where this malleability comes from, what its limits are, and the kind of politics it enables.

The history of the self emerges more fully as part of social or cultural history in the 1980s and 1990s. Much of this builds upon Michel Foucault’s late ideas around ‘technologies of the self’.⁴¹ In 1991, Lynn Hunt criticizes Foucault’s approach as ahistorical, since ‘[al]though the forms of self-transformation vary over time in Foucault’s analysis, the grounds of its psychic possibility do not’. Foucault’s concept is, she argues, ‘a distinctly modern or post-eighteenth-century formulation, in which individuals are figured as separate beings with separate selves who are able to act upon themselves and even transform themselves’.⁴² Indeed, Hunt’s analysis in the early 1990s has much in common with what is being pursued here, attempting to historicise the very idea that one’s self might be malleable. She charges that Foucault ‘cannot imagine a self other than the one newly deployed in the eighteenth century.’⁴³ There is much value to this critique, especially the way in which Foucault rashly ‘extends this notion’ of the self back to ancient Greece in his work on the history of sexuality.⁴⁴ However, elsewhere, Foucault does write about the historically specific emergence of ‘separate beings with separate selves’ in his work on penology in *Discipline and Punish*. Here he argues that ‘for a long time ordinary individuality – the everyday individuality of everybody – remained below the threshold of description’.⁴⁵ In any case, Hunt is absolutely right that notions of selfhood ought to be historicized; it ought not to be just presumed that social and cultural context alter or ‘stamp’ or ‘construct’ malleable selves in the same way.

Fast forward two decades and Hunt’s views on selfhood have changed. In ‘The Self and Its History’ (2014) she argues that ‘given the uncertainties about selfhood (what it is and how it

is produced), it might seem that any history of the self is next to impossible'.⁴⁶ However one way she attempts to resolve this difficulty is to borrow from a particular reading of neuroscience:

'Despite many reasons for caution, an ongoing dialogue with neuroscience offers the prospect of new approaches to such perennially vexed issues as agency, experience, action, and identity.'

She cautions that '[n]euroscience does not provide a handy model that historians can simply apply to their research. It functions more like psychoanalysis once did (and still does for some); as a field, it poses important questions and opens up new approaches to the mind, the self, and human behavior.'⁴⁷ The mention of psychoanalysis is telling here – given the links between malleable selfhood, psychoanalysis, anthropology, 'culturalism' and postmodernism.

Neuroscience here supplants other frames of reference, and it does not look so flexible.

Neuroscience – or at least one popularized version of it – becomes a frame of reference competing with anthropologically-influenced culturalism.

Drawing on the popularizing work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, Hunt argues that '[t]he self is a perspective rooted in a relatively stable, endlessly repeated biological state that gets its core from the structure and operation of the organism and then develops through slowly evolving biographical data.'⁴⁸ The core self is here fixed as an 'endlessly repeated biological state', and it is only later that 'biographical' (or social, or cultural) data have an effect. My problem with this is not that it is straightforwardly wrong – in a number of senses, it is not. The problem is that it establishes a more or less definite split between nature and culture, and privileges the former. It cannot see, much less accept, that the ways in which human beings conceptualise nature (or science, or reality, or whatever), is already indelibly cultural. Lorraine Daston and Peter Gallison show authoritatively how even as core a scientific concept as 'objectivity' is itself subject to far-reaching changes over time.⁴⁹ Why then should the 'neuroscience' of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries form a reliable guide for historical selfhood? Additionally, as Ruth Leys has shown, many of the scholars who rely

(directly or indirectly) on neuroscientific findings to buttress their work rely heavily on popularizers like Damasio, rather than the peer reviewed scientific content.⁵⁰ One reason for this, as Martyn Pickersgill has shown in the case of epigenetics,⁵¹ is that there is often no unproblematic sense of coherence about a science amongst many of its influential practitioners.

My point here is not to enter into a detailed critique of the ways some in the humanities are appropriating neuroscientific (and epigenetic) insights to buttress or structure their work. Surveys and analyses of this traffic between the humanities and neuroscience (and other life sciences) exist, from the trenchant critiques of Roger Cooter and Ruth Leys,⁵² through the pessimistic cautions of Martyn Pickersgill, Jorg Niewohner and Tim Newton,⁵³ to the cautious but more open stance of Felicity Callard, Des Fitzgerald, Nikolas Rose, Joelle Abi-Rached and Illina Singh, among many others.⁵⁴ Instead, my point here is to show that this shift towards friendlier cooperation between the life sciences and the human sciences is exposing the foundations of the old regime. This constructivism is not a denial of biology, as Steven Pinker has argued in his influential work *The Blank Slate*.⁵⁵ As Chris Renwick notes, Pinker disregards the fact that many social scientists simply have a different notion of the kinds of things that are inherited: ‘many social scientists, social reformers, and politicians were comfortable with hard heredity because its implication was that each generation started from scratch in biological terms.’⁵⁶ In fact, the ‘Standard Social Science Model’ is enabled by a bedrock of hard heredity, even as it sees itself as anti-biological.⁵⁷ This is about the kind of boundary that is drawn between nature and culture, not disregarding one or the other. This is where malleable humanity comes from: a particular field of interest, with a specific boundary drawn between nature and culture. This boundary is changing.

As my remarks imply, I believe that these collaborations are risky for the humanities and the rewards are relatively slim. There are obviously a huge number of questions begged by even this brief account of the ways in which human and life sciences intertwine. As Renwick recently

cautioned: ‘I’m not the greatest enthusiast for the idea that there are lessons that can be derived from history but one thing that does seem quite clear is that we should beware anyone who thinks they’ve got an easy application of biology to society.’ Renwick is open to ideas of collaboration, as well as investigating how the differences and entanglements *between* these disciplines have been formed *historically*: ‘taking the mid-twentieth-century programmes of forced sterilization in the USA and the Nazi regime as the obvious and only consequences of earlier ideas and assuming that people like Galton envisaged them [is problematic]. The history is much more complicated than that and a starting point for unravelling it is highlighting how it is actually embedded into the political world we still inhabit.’⁵⁸

But what has changed? One of the reasons is that developments in epigenetics once again allow conceptual space for the ‘social setting’ or ‘cultural environment’ to impact upon the core of humanity, envisioned in more or less biological terms. The other is the rise of neuroscience, and its partial adoption by those interested in ‘affect theory’ and, more generally, by historians of the emotions. Neuroscience and epigenetics have reconnected with the humanities, throwing light on the roots of the old models as fields shift and new approaches come into focus. As new collaborations now seem possible, it is also important to defend the insights of the humanities as critical tools to open up the claims of these sciences to scrutiny.

It is necessary to recognize, as Renwick says, that the ‘contours of the debate about biology look very different now to twenty years ago, when the Human Genome Project promised to be the capstone of one hundred years of genetic science. The result, of course, was more questions than answers’.⁵⁹ I have written elsewhere about the relationship between cultural anthropology, the new genetics and criticisms of Margaret Mead.⁶⁰ Renwick anticipates the thrust of the qualms expressed here about the return of biology:

‘Historically speaking, one of the major concerns about closer relations between biology and sociology has been that the latter will end up being colonized by the

former... Criticisms [of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology] quite rightly focused on the naturalization of conservative and reactionary ideas about the origin of things like gender identities. Whether one is for or against opening dialogue with biology, it is possible to accept that biosocial science need not be shaped by those values.’⁶¹

I am not against collaboration, but I am cautious about the very real power dynamics at play: genomics and neuroscience do not ‘need’ social sciences for financial support or to make their case to society more broadly for their value. In fact the reverse is the case. Funding is important here. Renwick notes that there exist ‘lots of resources available for carrying out [such collaborative] research... In an era of declining budgets for social science research, funding councils will look favourably on work that intersects with biology, not only because it will make bold claims that, if history is any guide, will not be delivered, but also because it will promise the kind of scientific credibility that governments periodically suggest the social sciences lack.’⁶² Fitzgerald and Callard make a similar point in their book on rethinking collaboration with the neurosciences...⁶³ In any case Renwick and Fitzgerald and Callard see more to be gained than lost: in Renwick’s words, ‘it is essential social scientists help decide what form [collaboration] takes.’⁶⁴

It is difficult to practice such collaboration whilst both: a) remaining credible about what social sciences can offer when placed in a collaborative relationship with the life sciences; and b) maintaining a critical and independent stance. One recent example of this is Fitzgerald, Rose and Singh’s article ‘Revitalizing Biology’ in the *British Journal of Sociology* in 2016, which advocates for collaboration between epigenetic science and sociology. Another is Callard and Fitzgerald’s short book *Rethinking Interdisciplinarity* (2016), about the theory and practice of collaborating with neuroscientists.⁶⁵ I have chosen these examples because they represent the best of those seeking collaboration: thoughtful, critical, generous and clear-sighted. They

anticipate – eloquently and assiduously – the problems mentioned here even as they press forward in calling for collaboration. The only thing I cannot share with these pieces is their optimism.

Fitzgerald, Rose and Singh argue that: ‘We are committed to the view that there is no role for sociology as an add-on, or a “service” discipline here. Precisely the opposite: the history that we have explored teaches us that it is precisely a sociological form of attention that can help to thicken and enliven the connections that clinicians, epidemiologists, and neurologists are tracking between mental health and the metropolis.’⁶⁶ There is a significant slippage between not being an add-on, and then being precisely that: what can it mean to ‘thicken’ and ‘enliven’ if not to be added later, to be non-essential to the processes at work, to be an optional extra? This is not to nit-pick, but to show how difficult it is to write and collaborate in a way that is credible and conceivable in the current climate and that is not – in essence – subservient to the life sciences.

Callard and Fitzgerald admit in *Rethinking Interdisciplinarity* that social sciences are now able to collaborate with the life sciences because of changes in the latter’s approach that admit the former’s insights as relevant: ‘there has been a qualitative shift, from the direction of the biological sciences, in perceptions of the grip that social life is thought to exert on the biology of the body.’⁶⁷ The shift towards inclusion has come from the life sciences. Callard and Fitzgerald argue elsewhere that ‘we know well that awkward questions remain about the epistemological politics at stake within these generous-looking invitations.’⁶⁸ Similarly, Fitzgerald, Rose and Singh are quite clear and precise about the risks, about the caution, and about the danger. I do not dispute that part of their analysis at all – they tease out many of the possible risks. But I cannot agree that they add up to a risk worth taking. They argue:

‘If such a position is not without risk for the epistemological space that social scientists have carved out, those risks are outweighed by imaginary, such that the social life of the city and the molecular life of the body do not compete

for priority but become mutually entangled within a complex, thickly-textured landscape of empirical research into the distribution of suffering, restoration and care.’⁶⁹

The idea that ‘those risks are outweighed’ and that sociology and molecular biology ‘do not compete for priority’ seems optimistic. Callard and Fitzgerald anticipate these points too: ‘we are not naïve about how unevenly epistemic and institutional authority is likely to be distributed across such entanglements, and we do not elide the unequal dynamics of power and prestige here... We have no fantasy of parity here’.⁷⁰ But this is precisely my point – calling for engagement across a divide that is acknowledged as vastly uneven seems questionable, to say the least. We live in a world where the life sciences have relatively vast funding and the social sciences are dwindling, instrumentalised, and offered a path back to relevance if they participate in this frame of reference.

Why should these boundaries evaporate because social scientists wish to collaborate in new ways? Life sciences succeed on their own terms, attract (comparatively) huge amounts of money, and are quite comfortable sorting out their ontological and epistemological debates internally, without reference to social scientists. They are unwilling (in general, as a group) to change substantially to suit collaboration with social science, and why should they? To bring another iteration of this volume’s central concept into play, the balance of power is in their favour, they are part of an entrenched, stable status quo.

Conclusion

I am fully committed to this idea of human nature being fundamentally contextual, inseparable from the various techniques with which we measure it, and the ideas we use to structure and understand it. This collection has shown how different notions of balance correspond to the various contexts in which they have been mobilised. ‘Balance’ has the

potential to be a description, metaphor or analogy (or all three). Of course whether or not things ‘balance’ depends upon where you place the pivot. Like the ‘political centre ground’ or ‘moderate politicians’, balance is entirely in the eye of the beholder. That is almost a truism. But we should not forget that for people to be differently constructed or ‘made up’ in relation to different kinds of ‘balance’ requires a deep plasticity, born of a specific reformulation of a colonial concept in early twentieth-century anthropology. If we want to be reflexive and self-aware, we need to reckon with the consequences of this. We must also be more explicitly aware that this plasticity is becoming more obvious now because it is being reformulated within epigenetic or neuroscientific frames of reference.

Those pushing neurological and neo-biological visions of self-hood are aware of the kind of ground upon which they stand – prestigious, highly technical life science methods. Of course how we appraise and validate ‘biology’ is itself culturally and historically specific; thus any attempt to position biology as a pre-cultural foundation-stone is fraught with difficulty. For those invested in plastic, context-specific notions of humanity, the question of the ‘foundations of our anti-foundationalism’ is rather more complex. This is a euphemistic way of saying that it is based on practices hanging over from one of the most murderous enterprises in human history: imperialism. After all, selfhood, psychology, anthropology and imperial administration are heavily entangled.⁷¹ This is deeply troubling – but we need to reckon with this history and come out fighting. One way that the history of medicine has sought to disrupt the hegemony of science involves the mobilisation of ‘personal narratives’ or ‘patient perspectives’. But these too are the product of history and are structured and constrained by notions of ‘experience’, psychoanalytic ‘catharsis’ and significant freight from 1960s social history.⁷² It seems unwise to risk ceding the humanities to the new biology (as friendly collaboration seems ill-placed to challenge the damaging frame of reference where the social sciences are second-class add-ons), or unthinkingly picking up tools forged in the service of colonialist administration and

differentiation. But regardless of the specific contexts, here is the key: if we can contextualise and take responsibility for the tools that we use, and thus the present contexts in which we use them, the politics of our histories emerges – not as a tacked-on ‘soapbox’ conclusion, but as an integral part of a methodological process. In much of this collection, balance is tightly bound with individualism, self-regulation and self-care in many of the contexts analysed. As broader questions emerge about the legitimacy of these pillars of economic common sense, the histories that we write are already implicated and bound up in them. This explicit present context is largely absent in the collection as it stands. Methodological self-awareness is one route to a robust present-centred perspective. There are no easy solutions, but we should begin by appreciating the historical context of the tools that frame our questions, and the political context in which our answers emerge.

Notes

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