

Comments on Philipp Budka's Working Paper
“From Cyber to Digital Anthropology to an Anthropology of the Contemporary?”

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This e-seminar, and the invitation to serve as discussant—thank you, Steve—comes timely and untimely at, well, the same time. On the one hand tasks and issues at the university are pressing and choking me. As always during the semester. On the other hand Philipp's paper deals exactly with my core interests, and is not just an interesting, but even an inspiring read.

Above that the e-seminar coincides with a recent review of my book 'Cyberanthropology' (Knorr 2011). Said review (Kohl 2011) was published last Wednesday in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and headlined 'Völkerkunde war gestern, Cyberanthropology ist heute,' meaning: [Old-fashioned] Social/Cultural Anthropology was yesterday, Cyberanthropology is today. That's some tall tale, granted, but here we have it all, the cyber-, the anthropology, and the contemporary. And indeed, all that I tried to crunch into the book.

Have no fear, this won't develop into a shameless self-advertising fest (the book's in German anyway), but now and then I'll cite the book, 'cause it contains points seconding Philipp's, some points contrasting, some maybe complementing. If you deem that to be shameless self-advertisement, blame Steve for having invited my humble self.

In the abstract to his paper Philipp makes it perfectly clear what central question he's aiming at: What's more fruitful for anthropology? To steer into the direction of an 'anthropology of the contemporary' (Rabinow & Marcus 2008)? Or, as it seems to be reigning fashion, to create ever new subdomains or even subdisciplines concerned with very specific phenomena?

To tackle these questions Philipp first discusses 'anthropologies' which throw their gaze upon technologies mainly developed as recent as about the last half century. Namely the 'anthropology of cyberculture' as sketched out and proposed by Escobar (1994), and 'digital anthropology,' since recently institutionalized and taught in London. After having provided an overview of an ethnographic example he himself is working on (not mentioned in the abstract), Philipp then proceeds to the 'anthropology of the contemporary,' followed by a short conclusion.

For openers Philipp recounts the etymology of 'cyberanthropology' (which he understands as to be synonymous to the 'anthropology of cyberculture'), naming 'cyberspace' and 'cyberpunk' as two examples sharing the same hip prefix. [Nitpick: It wasn't in Gibson's 'Neuromancer' (1984) that the term 'cyberspace' for the first time saw print, but in the short story 'Burning Chrome' (Gibson 1982). Nevertheless it's true that in the novel Gibson for the first time defined, what he meant by 'cyberspace,' and that with 'Neuromancer' the term spread in an unforeseen way on a grand scale.]

Then he leads over to the source of the prefix, the neologism 'cybernetics' coined by mathematician Norbert Wiener. In the following short sketch of cybernetics its entanglement with anthropology is

highlighted. As proponents are mentioned Mead and Bateson, Lévi-Strauss, and, rightfully so (compare Knorr 2010, 2011: 55), Clifford Geertz. Allow me to add Roy Rappaport. Parts of his work (1967, 1971) are shining examples of a full-fledged cyberneticized anthropology.

Bateson is not only mentioned by Philipp, but also cited and discussed a bit (may I additionally recommend Bale 1995). Bateson is the perfect choice, because he was not just someone who read and absorbed cybernetics, but was himself at the core of the ongoing. He and Mead were regulars at the Macy-Conferences, where cybernetics have been shaped and honed. In contrast Clyde Kluckhohn, to my knowledge, only appeared once there.

After quoting Bateson ardently preaching the gospel of cybernetics as the redeeming paradigm, Philipp gets ready to lead over to a discussion of Escobar's, in my eye seminal, article of 1994: "How this [cybernetics, Bateson] developed into cyberanthropology will be discussed in the following."

I'm afraid, but I didn't get where in the paper this is achieved. Don't get me wrong, I second nearly every word Philipp has to say on Escobar 1994 within the following pages—I'll come back to some instances where I do not agree later. Plus, I fully endorse Philipp's bringing in of Pfaffenberger 1988 and 1992a (and would like to add Pfaffenberger 1992b) and his stressing of the notion of technology as a Mauss'ean total social phenomenon.

But how did cyberanthropology develop out of cybernetics, and where is the connection between cybernetics and Escobar's 'anthropology of cyberculture?'

In Escobar 1994 the etymology of 'cyber-' and the mentioning of cybernetics remains nice-to-know historical background. Philipp went a step further and discusses Bateson, but then the rupture comes. Allow me to try to make the loose ends meet.

Escobar bid us 'welcome to Cyberia' and hinted at a path towards an 'anthropology of cyberculture.' But astoundingly enough Escobar takes words as 'cyberspace' and the like to be misnomers—he only uses the term 'cyberculture' as an element of analysis due to the widespread acceptance of the prefix 'cyber-' (1994: 211, fn. I.) Just having complied to fashion while formulating new concepts is not quite an academic justification—a weak one at best. I do not at all share the opinion that 'cyber-' is misleading. Quite to the contrary, it directly hints towards the core of where Escobar wants us to lead. In said paper Escobar himself delivers the starting points for my argument.

In Escobar's view "'Cyberculture" specifically refers to new technologies in two areas: artificial intelligence (particularly computer and information technologies) [that is a misnomer] and biotechnology. It would be possible to separate out these two sets of technologies for analytical purposes, although it is no coincidence that they have achieved prominence simultaneously.' (1994: 214)

Still according to Escobar, computer and information technologies bring forth 'technosociality', biotechnology brings forth 'biosociality,' 'a new order for the production of life, nature, and the body through biologically based technological interventions.' (1994: 214)

When tracking the fashion Escobar claims to have followed, when searching for the semantic meanings popular culture, the industry's advertisement departments, and academic discussions have ascribed to 'cyber-', one discovers a fabric consisting of ICTs and science fiction, but very seldom biotechnology—with the exception of artistical production falling into the cyberpunk genre (Knorr

2011: 64-102).

Now, what is the missing link between the two sets? The answer lies in the mistrusted prefix itself. Respectively in its root, in Norbert Wiener's neologism 'cybernetics,' in the academic discourse hiding behind the concept, and in everything which has arisen from that discourse. ('Discourse' in the sense of Foucault's 'Archaeology of Knowledge' (1969), and how the concept was operationalised by Saïd in his 'Orientalism' (1978))

For recapitulation: first of all a cybernetic approach means to exemplarily envision observed phenomena as systems. That means as entities which consist of elements, whereby the latter are interrelated and interact by rules.

Cyberneticians are not so much interested in what systems consist of, but how they function as a whole. The subject of cybernetics are the abstract principles of organisation, coordination, regulation, and control in complex systems—no matter of what kind, technical, physical, biologic, social, or whatyouhave.

In the process of marking itself off from mechanistic visions, cybernetics quite early emphasised a whole array of concepts: networks, complexity, self-organisation, reproduction, adaptation, cognition, aiming at and maintaining goal-states, purposeful behaviour—or action?, and autonomy. This line-up implicitly leads towards a vision of cybernetic systems as independent actors, maybe even gifted with 'free will.' Therefore it is not astounding that a hypothetical analogy emerged early on: 'mind to body' is like 'information to machine.'

Because cybernetics—as they were formed as a transdisciplinary project immediately after World War II—had crucial influence on the engineering sciences, on the emergence of disciplines like e.g. computer science and the science of cognition, cybernetics are via technosociality crucial for the shape of contemporary culture and society as well.

There's even more to it. During the 1960s immense spill-over effects took place. The majority of academic disciplines already was deeply infested with cybernetics, and now the political and social administrations of the highly industrialized nation-states and the industry fell prey to it.

To put it drastically, cybernetics and its heritage to a large degree shaped our contemporary world. And our contemporary thinking—the instances of cybernetics' influence on anthropology which Philipp has named, are symptoms of that.

Despite all the fascination cybernetics may have, I am not at all aiming at re-introducing cybernetics into anthropology à la Gregory Bateson. I am aiming at recognising cybernetics as a hidden cultural paradigm. Human actions are culturally informed and cybernetics have become a tacit cultural discourse—disguised as common sense.

In other words: Me personally, I am convinced that the shape of our contemporary world owes a lot to cybernetics. Hence we anthropologists have to pay attention to it. A first argument for why 'Cyberanthropology' may well be a fitting name for an anthropology of the contemporary.

That said I'd like to return, as promised, to some points I do not agree with.

Right after his discussion of Pfaffenberger's anthropology of technology Philipp writes: 'How should anthropology deal with, for instance, the emerging digital information and communication

technologies (ICTs)?'

Here I do sense a rhetorical manoeuvre.

Remember: Escobar deals with computer- and biotechnology, Pfaffenberger with technology in general. Directly adjacent Philipp writes 'for instance' ICTs, but from the next page on, after he has cited Hakken, it's exclusively about ICTs. Like ICTs were a proxy for all kinds of contemporary technology—that's what the 'for instance' insinuates. [Are we still friends, Philipp? ;-]

This narrowing of the focus on ICTs is furtherly narrowed by Axel's 'linguistic turn in the anthropological discussion about ICTs,' which Philipp relates before he comes to 'digital anthropology.' It's not just communication which is mediated by the Internet infrastructure, but also interaction. There are things beyond the direct reach of language 'on the Net,' like tacit and bodily knowledge. (Knorr 2009) Especially in respect to the latter think of the scenes of the computer gamers.

As, not an alternative, but a kind of complementary suggestion to an absolute focus on ICTs, here's my idea of 'cyberanthropology.' I do not envision an anthropology of technology, rather an anthropology which takes the interrelationships between human beings and technology as its starting point, as the privileged vehicle of principle access. Analogous to Danny Miller's provocative argumentation (1995): Kinship was yesterday, consumption and commodities are today.

Once our vehicle has granted us access, we again are aiming at the ideal of the 'research imaginary Holism,' fully conscious that we can never reach it. But it serves as a navigational aid. Like when we point our vessel towards the polar star, fully conscious that we'll never reach the star, but it tremendously helps staying on course.

Of course digital electronics (in all its manifestations, not just ICTs) play a decisive if not dominant role. But it's not only digital media technologies which are ubiquitous. There are things way beyond Facebook around. The article 'Satellite culture' by Claudio Aporta and Eric Higgs (2005) I deem to be a wonderful example of a true anthropology of the contemporary—of cyberanthropology.

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