ABSTRACT: How far is the ethnographic study of ‘cosmologies’ relevant to contemporary anthropology, and how might it illuminate understandings of the contemporary world? In this article we argue for a renewed anthropological interest in matters cosmological by seeking to disentangle the study of cosmology from the concomitants with which it was associated in earlier periods of anthropological research. In particular, we argue that an orientation toward cosmology continues to be of prime importance to the discipline insofar as it can be freed from its associations with holism and exoticism. The shift from ‘high modernity’ (in which orientations toward cosmos are variously constrained and circumscribed) to the flattening effects of the ‘fluid’ modernity of neoliberalism, we argue, has tended to thrust concerns with cosmic orders and dynamics back onto the forefront of people's lives. We end the article with a series of programmatic observations of how anthropologists might respond to these shifts, both ethnographically and analytically.

KEYWORDS: cosmology, high modernity, holism, indigenous cosmologies, neo-liberalism, social relations

The cosmos has become cool again.
— The Guardian, 21 January 2012

Addressing the Cosmology Group, an informal reading group that we run with our graduate students in the Anthropology Department at University College London (UCL), a few months before she died, Mary Douglas expressed surprise that in this day and age anthropologists might still be interested in such a topic. Cosmology is the kind of thing the Lele possessed when she studied with them in the 1950s, she said, and no doubt they and other groups like them still live with its cultural remnants (see also Douglas 1963). But has not the urbanization of the developing world, together with the concerted repatriation of anthropology to the metropolis in recent decades, rendered our traditional concern with indigenous cosmologies well-nigh anachronistic? For astride the complexity of the modern world, Douglas ventured, surely people no longer share a cosmology, as the Lele and others may have done in pre-modern times. Notwithstanding the prestige enjoyed by professional cosmologists working in departments of theoretical physics and their...
popular appeal when through the media they address the wider public with their phantasmagoric findings, the plain fact is that the contemporary world is just too complicated to sustain the kinds of unified and collective cosmology encountered by earlier generations of anthropologists among ‘primitive’ peoples. At any rate, Douglas concluded, the kinds of isomorphic correspondences between social organization and cosmological reckonings from which anthropologists drew such theoretical mileage throughout much of the twentieth century are now probably nowhere to be found. So what interest could the study of cosmology possibly hold for anthropologists today?

Somewhat paradoxically, given her anthropological age set, Douglas’s comments expressed exactly the kind of weariness toward cosmology against which we felt we were working in our research and in the Cosmology Group. So, inevitably, coming from an anthropologist whose own work had for so long been so deeply invested in the study of cosmology (e.g., Douglas 1963, 1996), Douglas’s cosmo-weariness was particularly poignant (not to say, untimely), adding a sense of urgency to the questions on which our group had already been deliberating for some time. What is the relevance of the study of indigenous cosmologies to contemporary anthropology? Can one think of cosmology beyond outmoded assumptions about tribal societies and the like? What might the role of cosmology be in modern society? And, in the end, what is cosmology? While in no way purporting to represent the breadth of our ongoing conversations on these topics within the Cosmology Group1 (let alone its participants’ diverse thoughts), the present article sets out some of the perspectives we have developed as a result of these discussions. In a necessarily brief and ultimately programmatic way, our aim is to articulate what we take to be the relevance of cosmologically oriented approaches in the anthropology of contemporary social relations everywhere—our answer to Mary Douglas, albeit posthumous, alas.

So in this article we do two things. In the first section, we offer some reflections on the broad trends of thinking about cosmology in twentieth-century anthropology that led up to the kind of weariness toward the topic by the beginning of the twenty-first that Douglas was expressing. Our key claim here is that the ambivalence with which the topic of cosmology is presently viewed in many quarters is owed to its association with certain tenets of what we call the ‘classical ethnological’ period of anthropological research, namely, on the one hand, ideas of holism and, on the other, variously explicit epistemic hierarchies (us/them, ‘West’/rest, etc.), which tended to exoticize indigenous cosmologies. In the second section, we go beyond anthropology to argue that the recent weariness toward cosmology in anthropology is nevertheless paradoxical, inasmuch as it is out of step with what, as we suggest, is an abiding reinvestment in matters cosmological—a veritable reconnection with cosmos—in the ‘late modern’ aftermath of neo-liberal socio-economic ideologies. In this context, cosmology once again emerges as a prime ethnographic concern for anthropology, only now located also as a quintessentially contemporary one. On this premise, we then discuss the kinds of novel terrains of investigation that an anthropology newly sensitized to questions of cosmology might develop, free from assumptions about holism and exoticizing hierarchies of cultural perspectives so characteristic of earlier approaches to the topic.

**Cosmologies: Anthropological and Indigenous**

Imagine doing an ethnography of how anthropology was practiced in the times Douglas remembered—anthropology’s classical ethnological period, running roughly from the 1920s to the 1970s, when the study of ‘indigenous cosmologies’ formed an integral part of anthropologists’ confident attempts to chart comparatively the social and cultural dimensions of (mainly ‘primitive’) people’s lives. In brief, one would find a set of highly educated nationals of colonial and post-colonial powers self-consciously traveling ‘outward’, to the edges of the world, in order
to encounter, describe, and explicate what human society and culture looks like at its margins. The sense in which the societies that anthropologists went out to study were marginal was, of course, itself part of the anthropological debate. In particular, while nineteenth-century evolutionism conceived the distance between ‘civilized society’ and the ‘savgery’ of people imagined as living at its furthest reaches (geographically, economically, politically, etc.) as a matter of ‘natural’ differences, anthropologists spent much of the twentieth century showing that the distance between their own society and those which they studied was itself social and cultural. This involved developing a series of axes along which these socio-cultural differences could be articulated: primitive/advanced, simple/complex, stateless/state, pre- or non-literate/literate, pre- or non-modern/modern, myth/history, magic/science, or—perhaps the most encompassing master contrast of all—tradition/modernity.

Not unlike the evolutionist matrices of natural stages of socio-cultural development that they purported to replace, then, these classical master contrasts presented an image of the world as a totality, marking its dimensions outward, from the familiar center (namely, modern life as we know it) toward a socio-cultural series of differently construed unfamiliar margins. This is to say that, in its classic ethnological rendition, anthropology was itself an exercise in cosmology through and through, projecting human being concentrically and spatio-temporally along a social and cultural gradient, stretching outward from a series of civilized centers. Indeed, rather like cosmologists proper (viz. theoretical physicists), anthropologists imagined themselves as charting the outer reaches of the social universe—its very horizons—in order to better theorize the whole. Only for these anthropologists (Mary Douglas included), the universe consisted of the varied social and cultural manifestations that make up humanity as a globally juxtaposed domain of investigation. Central to this whole was a modern core that was organizationally complex and more or less culturally homogeneous—split epicentrally but still predominantly united—while, marginally, on the periphery of exploration, commerce, and governance, this same whole curled inward in myriad places, organizationally similar (as worlds or totalities), but culturally differentiating and diverse. This was the cosmological picture that emerged from the classical ethnological period of anthropology.

Historians of ideas have much to say about how this image of a human cosmos relates to broader arcs of thinking, including monotheistic conceptions of divine creation and providence, Enlightenment images of the uniformity of nature, and the Romantic enchantment with the diversities of human genius (e.g., Dupré 1993; McGrane 1989). Here, however, we may note only that, based on an ontology of a uniform nature subject to a diversity of cultural viewpoints, this image provided also the framework for the anthropological study of indigenous cosmologies, as well as a template for their overall shape. In particular, it framed the study of indigenous cosmologies with reference to what we may call a ‘topology of reflexive ethnocentrism’. According to this image, the human cosmos marks out a particular kind of space whose chief peculiarity is that it contains within itself multiple perspectives on itself—it is in this sense a ‘reflexive’ space. Conceived as ‘cultures’, ‘collective representations’, ‘symbolic systems’, and so on, these perspectives on the world—each of them a ‘whole’ unto itself—are themselves deemed to be rooted in particular ‘parts’ of the human world, designated as societies or other scales of grouping. Different social groupings may support different cultural perspectives, so each ‘ethnos’, in that metaphoric sense, provides a ‘center’ unto itself.

It follows that, conceived as a cosmological project, anthropology’s attempt to chart the horizons of the human world is just one actualization of the vast cosmological potential that this topology is able to engender. For if the human world is imagined as reflexively ethnocentric in this way, with each part of the world (each society) being able to generate a whole perspective of its own (i.e., its own culture or, as it is also said, ‘worldview’), then one can also ask what account
each of these perspectives might provide of the world as such, which is to say as a whole topos, populated by particular kinds of entities organized in specific ways and according to their own dimensions and proportions. In this way, providing accounts of such indigenous cosmologies became an integral part of an anthropology that imagined itself as charting the reflexive horizons of the human cosmos overall. Indeed, it became virtually indispensable to pursue this line of investigation, since such cosmologies were thought to provide the overall coordinates within which the people whom anthropologists studied conceived of themselves and their social practices. Thus, to take just two classic examples, Trobriand Islanders conceived of their social organization with reference to spatio-temporal ideas about the auto-regeneration of insular spirits and totemic origins in the ground (Malinowski 1948), while Tallensi understood kinship not just in terms of immediate face-to-face relations between kin and affines but also in terms of founding ancestors who still resided in groves or caves in surrounding space (Fortes 1987).

This way of construing the nature of indigenous cosmologies has two corollaries that we would argue are key to understanding the apparent demise of this anthropological preoccupation in recent years. Firstly, the study of indigenous cosmology was necessarily conceived as an exercise in holism, and this in two related senses. On the one hand, at the level of method, cosmology is conceived as a particular part of the total cultural perspective that any given society might generate, to be understood alongside all those elements that go together to make the society in question an ‘organic’ whole—kinship, social and political organization, economic arrangements, ritual practices, and so on. On the other hand, with respect to its contents, indigenous cosmology was also whole unto itself, inasmuch as its role is taken to be that of presenting an account of the indigenous cultural perspective conceived as a whole—par excellence, a discourse about the ultimate horizons of what people variably take to be ‘the world’. Indigenous cosmology, one might even say in short, is that part of the total culture whose role it is to totalize it (Bubandt and Otto 2010; Holbraad 2010).

A second consequence of the reflexive ethnocentrism of classical takes on indigenous cosmology has to do with the hierarchical way in which it orders different perspectives on the world and, particularly, the superiority it accords to the cosmological project of the anthropologists at the expense of those of the people they study. True, the ‘ethnocentric’ character of anthropologists’ cosmology consists in the fact that each society is able generate its own image of the world, constituting a center unto itself. So in this sense all cultural perspectives are equal. Still, the very set-up of this cosmology does imply that some cultural perspectives are more equal than others. For if what holds this image together is the idea of a single and uniform world (i.e., nature, including human nature) that acts as both ground and object for the diverse perspectives that different societies may take within and upon it, it follows that such perspectives can be ranked in relation to how far they partake of this a priori grounding and actually get the world ‘right’ (Holbraad 2012: 18–34; Latour 1993a). And in this respect anthropologists have a constitutive advantage over the people they study since it is they who delineate cosmologically the conditions of existence of all marginal cosmologies, setting constraints upon the ways in which alternative images of the world can play out ‘in their own terms’ in the poly-cosmological cosmos set up by classical anthropology. Construed as a science, which is to say as part of the broader project of systematically developing authoritatively accurate representations of the world, anthropology sees itself as being in the business of describing the ‘real’ (human) world. And, from the first anthropological/cosmological principles (so to speak), this involved describing a series of alternative images of the world (indigenous cosmologies), which to varying extents were manifestly fanciful, even though valid at their own cosmic locus, meaning in their own right. The master contrasts of classical anthropology (tradition/modernity and so on) lend analytical weight to this basic—and for most of the twentieth century self-evident—hierarchy of perspectives.
It goes without saying that deciding how to deal with this implication of anthropology’s cosmology of the human has been at the core of much theoretical debate within the discipline more or less from its inception—evolutionism versus diffusionism, universalism versus relativism, realism versus constructivism, and so forth. While we cannot enter into these larger debates here, it is worth remarking that the status of indigenous cosmologies vis-à-vis ‘Western science’ was for long one of the principal arenas in which these tense implications played out, not least when it came to disputes over the ‘rationality’ of indigenous ‘beliefs’, which reached their peak in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Horton and Finnegan 1973; Wilson 1970). That this should be so is hardly surprising, although not so much because of the putatively quasi-scientific nature of indigenous cosmologies (e.g., Horton 1967), we would argue, but rather due to the thoroughly cosmological character of science—and not least anthropology itself, as we have seen. Be that as it may, the fact is that, due to the very cosmological set-up within which indigenous cosmologies were conceptualized by anthropologists, their variously fanciful, less-than-true character was felt to be the abiding theoretical problem that they presented. Even cultural relativism, with its refusal to pass analytical judgment on the veracity of one cosmology over another while nonetheless framing the ground rules within which a fanciful cosmology might validly play out, is itself partly a response to just this problem—albeit a particularly laissez-faire one (see also Overing 1985).

The standard response to the problem of indigenous cosmological fancy, however, was to reduce it. Indeed, to demonstrate how abiding the problem has traditionally been for anthropologists, one could even pinpoint the most distinctive features of the main theoretical currents in twentieth-century anthropology with reference to the particular ways in which they referred indigenous beliefs with their cosmological foundations to some other, ostensibly more real level of explanation. Basic human needs (functionalism), moral and socio-political order and reproduction (structural-functionalism), ecological adaptation (cultural materialism), individual agency (methodological individualism), the expression of underlying social values (interpretativism, symbolism) or social relations (practice theory) even of a gestalt personality (culture and personality school), ideology and false consciousness (Marxism): all of these classic anthropological positions and more were posited at different times as competing explanations as to why societies the world over set such great store in imagining the totality of the world in ways that have to be recognized as false. It is telling, in fact, that even those anthropologists who have been most inclined to take indigenous cosmologies seriously enough to use them as a baseline for (rather than merely an object of) anthropological theorization, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marshall Sahlins, or Mary Douglas herself, have sometimes felt the need ultimately to ground indigenous cosmological reckonings in levels of analysis that could be recognized as really real—the underlying binary structures of the human mind for Lévi-Strauss (1963), the unfolding of universal history and its local structures of conjuncture for Sahlins (1985), or the abiding social and cognitive formations of ‘group and grid’ for Douglas (1996).

Now, the relative demise of anthropologists’ concern with indigenous cosmologies in recent decades (roughly from the 1980s onward) could be recounted as a story of the ascending dominance of just this kind of reductive impulse—the tendency, one could say, to refer indigenous ways of imagining the world to notions of cosmos, indeed, but to constituents of the cosmos that we, as anthropologists, could recognize as real. On such an interpretation, the very notion of cosmology has simply collapsed under the pressure of increasingly sophisticated and convincing modes of analysis that locate explanatory power—the ‘action’ of analysis—elsewhere. The rise of cognitive anthropology in this period would perhaps provide the most obvious example of a straightforward ‘reduction’ of this kind: qua representations of the world, people’s cosmological reckonings are examples of cognitive processes at work in the human brain, so cosmological thinking is best understood not in its own terms but with reference to the brain processes
it instantiates (e.g., Boyer 1994; Sperber 1985; Whitehouse 2000). Conversely, moving in the opposite direction, analyses that one could group under the banner of ‘new political economy’ have tended to treat putatively ‘local’ cosmologies as functions of ostensibly larger, worldwide processes, such as ‘the world system’, ‘empire’, ‘modernity’, ‘capitalism’, and so forth. Transfiguring the anthropological cosmology of a global human world that is already cosmologically differentiated and folded back on its margins, these approaches present indigenous cosmologies as inventive reactions to, or refractions of, more encompassing—and in that sense also more real—global processes (e.g., Boddy 1989; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Geschiere 1997; cf. Englund and Leach 2000). Finally, for its part, actor-network theory (ANT) has been performing similar forms of analytical displacement, although arguably for exactly the opposite reasons. Refusing as a matter of first methodological principle to accord more significance or explanatory power to any one part of the world over another (and hence opposed to all forms of reduction; see Latour 1993b), ANT theorists treat all data—from an irritating pebble in one’s shoe to world banking to the dogma of the Holy Trinity—as myriad elements that can make differences to each other through relations of determinate forms. Any added importance that cosmological discourses might claim for themselves (as they so often do) therefore becomes just a further local element to be described in its relations with others in the ‘network’ (e.g., Latour 2010; cf. Holbraad 2004; Tsing 2010), possessing an efficacy accorded not by its categorical imaginaries but by the myriad overdeterminations of the network.

In each of these trends of thinking, so prominent in the past 20 years or so, indigenous cosmologies become partial, contingent, local, transient, neutered, and ultimately epiphenomenal to something else. Still, we would argue that, although it accounts for cosmology’s declining stock in anthropological analysis in recent years, this theoretical displacement does not do justice to the rather more complex and ambivalent stance that anthropology overall has taken toward the idea and analysis of cosmology. Note, after all, that concern with cosmology has hardly disappeared. Indeed, while senior scholars who had a stake in articulating cosmologically oriented approaches in the past continue to expand on this work (e.g., De Coppet and Iteanu 1995; Descola 2005; Handelman 2008; Humphrey and Onon 1996; Kapferer [1988] 2012; Sahlin 2004; Schrempp 1992; Viveiros de Castro 2012), a number of younger researchers are taking the agenda forward in different ways (e.g., Pedersen 2011; M. Scott 2007; Willerslev 2007). Call this cosmology’s second wind. One could even argue that, if anything, the fact that cosmology has been so unfashionable for so long has made its theoretical prosecution something of an iconoclastic exercise, attractive to those who, with various degrees of self-consciousness, like to swim against the current. (The present article is written a little in this spirit.).

This persistent ambivalence, we suggest, can be understood with reference to the rather battered state in which the anthropological cosmology of ‘one-world-many-worldviews’ finds itself today. Under the influence of a heterogeneous set of critical turns that have taken hold of the discipline from the 1980s onward (e.g., the so-called crisis of representation, post-colonial theory, postmodern reverie, the rise of phenomenology and embodiment, practice theory, as well as the variously reductive trends mentioned earlier), it has become increasingly difficult to pledge allegiance to the classical agenda of comparative research in anthropology without, in the same breath, offering a series of self-censuring provisos. Crucially for our argument, the two vital corollaries of the reflexively ethnocentric topology on which research on indigenous cosmologies relied—namely, holism and the hierarchy of ‘modern us’ over ‘primitive them’—have both become big disciplinary no-nos. So since in its classical rendition the very notion of indigenous cosmology presupposed forms of holism and cross-cultural hierarchy, as we have seen, the sustained attack on these corollaries of the classical approach has tended to take down cosmology, too—by way of collateral damage, so to speak. In this intellectual climate, cosmology just feels wrong.
Indeed, the ambivalence toward cosmology and even the persistence of its study in some quarters can be understood with reference to the very partial and often altogether unprincipled or even incoherent character of the prevalent attitudes toward holism and us/them talk. For while many of these critiques are by now well-taken, they have rarely been accompanied by a concerted critique, let alone a systematic reconstitution, of the cosmological matrix that situates them and of which they are a function, namely, the modern dispositif of a single world subject to plural worldviews. It is telling of this confusion, for example, that aversion to holism and the cross-cultural authority of science is typically professed on the grounds of some variant of cultural relativism or social constructionism—theoretical options that work very much within the cosmological coordinates that engender holism and hierarchy in the first place.

One way—indeed, the royal way—out of this predicament of half-measured ambivalence toward indigenous cosmologies would be to advance, precisely, a thoroughgoing experimentation with anthropological cosmology itself. Indeed, such lines of research have been developing for some time now, with a number of anthropologists exploring the ‘recursive’ effects that ethnographic materials can have on the very terms in which they are analyzed, including, most fundamentally perhaps, the world/worldviews matrix (e.g., Crook 2007; Strathern 1988; Wagner 1981). In this connection, it would be most relevant to explore the ways in which other indigenous cosmological reckonings can provide analytical leverages for such recursive experimentation with the very infrastructure of anthropological research itself (e.g., Holbraad 2012; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2011).

Given space constraints, however, we limit ourselves here to presenting some thoughts on what cosmologically oriented approaches could look like in the wake of the aforementioned critiques. For, as we propose to show, there is no need to throw the cosmological baby out with the bathwater: anthropological interest in cosmology can be thoroughly decoupled from its traditional association with holism and us/them hierarchies. Indeed, recognizing this does more than merely render the concept of cosmology fit for contemporary anthropological purposes. As we shall argue, there is an important sense in which a concern with cosmology is more apposite to the contemporary world than it ever was to putatively primitive ones. In close correlation with political and economic shifts that have taken place since the 1970s—broadly speaking, from what we, following James Scott (1999), call ‘high modernity’ to neo-liberalism—a new cosmological sensibility has begun to emerge, and this new orientation toward the cosmos is generating novel ways of being concerned with it.

We begin the next section by briefly sketching the features of this reorientation in historical terms, identifying the emergence of newly immediate relationships with the cosmos as a defining feature of the ‘late’ and ‘liquid’ modernity of neo-liberalism. The crux of the argument is that, for the most part, high modernity was constitutionally ‘bi-cosmological’, and that contemporary so-called neo-liberal displacements in particular have begun to simplify the structure, such that, more than ever before, and in a sense we shall explain, humans are now ‘thrown into cosmos’. We then go on to outline programmatically the fresh anthropological terrain opened up by this change in cosmological sensibility—a terrain upon which older insights confidently return to the fore and new objects cautiously emerge.

From High Modernity to Neo-liberal Orders: Reconnecting with Cosmos

So in what sense was high modernity cosmologically duplicated and polarized? And how is this polarization now transforming? In sum, the doubling of cosmos in high modernity reflected a separation between, on the one hand, dedicated cosmological thinking—or ‘cosmology making’...
(Barth 1990)—at the official but highly specialized and socially exclusive level where scientists were asked to interrogate cosmos and, on the other, much more subsumed and politically circumscribed concerns with cosmology at the level of modernist ideology, practice, and organization. As Alexandre Koyré (1957) showed in his landmark history of modern cosmology, the official level was occupied by physicists, astronomers, and philosophers who gave real meaning to the Renaissance by delivering a new cosmos from the womb of the medieval world. The latter was configured as a vaulted whole, enclosed by Heaven above and Hell below and by a God who clasped the whole close to and within himself. Within this whole, everything of astronomical significance revolved around the earth conceived as the privileged planetary dwelling of human beings, and it was within the compressed, hierarchical ordering of this whole from above that entities held fixed (rather than accidental) relations with one another (Lovejoy 1936). Moreover, within this structure, God himself was finitely and anthropomorphically conceived.

By contrast, Koyré shows, the modern revolution progressively dismantled the sacred figure and the power that enforced this closure. It spiritualized and then abolished the Godhead, decentering the cosmos as a whole, first by promoting the sun and then by cutting loose the heliocentric system itself within an open and expanding universe. Contrary to Newton’s belief, nineteenth- and twentieth-century physics then came to theorize the absence of any immanent force that could ultimately reverse the entropy of matter and energy within the universe, leaving in situ no guarantee of a harmonious process that would routinely tip the earthly balance in favor of integration as opposed to chaos.

While this physical thinking has carried the status of received cosmological wisdom for the best part of a century, even for literate and curious classes its meaning has largely remained obscure. From the theory of relativity to black holes, from quantum theory to Schrödinger’s cat, from electrons to the ‘God particle’, such crucial propositions on the nature of Being have attracted fascination in, more or less, inverse proportion to their comprehension. In effect, their understanding has mainly transposed into a ‘general knowledge’ of heroic names and momentous events, achieving supremacy at the level of science, iconic celebrity at the level of popular culture, and yet minimal penetration at the level of grassroots cosmology.

This, as Toulmin (1992) has also argued, was because the official cosmology of modernity was culturally marginalized at the heart of the social system—of Society—by the contrary pressure exerted upon it by a generalized progressive consciousness. At heart, cosmological openness was redacted because, axiomatically and at every level, Progress gradually aggregated matter, exempting natural (including social) formations from the centrifugal chaos of cosmic contingency. In fact, the immense power of the Principle of Progress was to endow modern subjects with the unquestioned sense that, as enlightened actors, they could rationally institute Society (and History) in the same way as God synthetically created the Heavens and the Earth, and that they could remake Human Beings through Society as He had made them in the first place. This taken-for-granted eternal return to Creation at the grassroots of high modernity would be continuously secured through the illusion of a hermetic sealing of rational practice from disruptive context (namely, from accidents, side effects, subjectivities, criminalities, insanities), mirroring microcosmically high modernity’s exemption of humankind from the infinite openness of the physicists’ universe, which could in turn be astronomically externalized. Essentially, thereby, the dual cosmology of high modernity involved the reproduction of an essentially medieval closure of the world at the heart of high modernity, inwardly functioning as Society whose most providential expression was the State itself (Hegel 1929), beneath the more cerebrally unconfined cosmology of an infinite, open universe, the study of which was regarded as the esoteric pursuit of a limited elite of natural scientists—indeed, cosmologists.
It is the unraveling of this duality, we argue, and, in particular, the significant weakening of the medieval residue at the heart of Society that establish a new cosmological orientation in the West (which remains the heartland of anthropological practice) and that underpin the sense that modernity has somehow entered a distinctive new phase that is post, late, or liquid. What is the pattern of this unraveling? What cultural effects does it promote? What does it suggest for cosmologically conscious anthropology? Answering these questions discloses several anthropological possibilities, of which we shall trace three in particular, albeit briefly and in a strictly programmatic way.

The first directs attention to the ‘structure of the conjuncture’ (sensu Sahlins 1985) in which cosmological reorientation begins to occur. We can hypothesize that the neo-liberalization of political space historically provokes this reorientation, setting a stable and recurrent pattern in which contemporary subjects begin to feel spatio-temporally relocated. How so? How does a strident political economy of supposedly unfettered social relations open out onto an infinite universe to become a salient life-world in the process? In many texts, anthropological ones among them, neo-liberalism dolefully means the commodification of everything, the consequent reduction of all human value to price, and the hyper-individualization of agency. True enough. However, we can, if we theorize beyond the social categories of this ‘conscious model’, also register a more profound—because more ramifying—spatio-temporal consequence of this politico-economic rearrangement. Indeed, the crucial effect, produced systemically by economic deregulation and tacit denationalization, is for populations not only to feel severed from traditional communities (Giddens 1991) and receding homelands (Clifford 1997), but also to feel inchoately ‘thrown into a world’ without limits (Heidegger 1962)—in effect, to be cast into a space that is no longer vaulted by the State above and by the Nation below. The result is that, with the much-vaunted death of Society, the social becomes part of an ill-definable felt infinity that can be portrayed in many registers, all of them allowing for the possibility—and in some cases the inescapability—of significant continuities with the immensities of cosmic process (‘out there’), along with its all-pervasive nanosphere (‘in here’).

Examples of this sense of being cut loose and cast out into an indeterminate space can be drawn from traditional subject areas in anthropology as well as in fields freshly opened up by new technologies, perceptions, and experiences. In the field of religion, for instance, Western worshippers find themselves decreasingly drawn toward a sacredness that emanates from, and gravitates toward, some elevated altar piece or architectural center. Rather, a new religious binary tends to emerge that, at the one pole, opens up to the maternal flows and energies of Earth, Sky, Sea, and Mountain (the New Age) and, at the other, allows for penetration by the overflowing paternity of Spirit (e.g., in Pentecostal churches). These new religions rely upon amorphous redeemers in Nature and Heaven with energies that are not easily contained by either heroic personification or sacred building and that may well ecologically overflow to attain regular apotheoses in forests, rivers (Baptist as well as New Age), and the marketplace. The sacredness of these redemptive agencies seems much more at home in an infinite cosmos of myriad openings and flows than in a human-directed ‘dei-sphere’ that is typically set aside from the profanities of flesh or lucre.

Similarly, the Western body also now seems more open to ‘cosmic’ cause and affordance. ‘Sick’ buildings mysteriously transmit spectral affect over and above the rigorous materiality of their architectural design. Pathological pylons, tumor-inducing phones, and leukemia-producing substations generate putatively new illnesses that are credibly attributed to concentrations of waves, particles, and rays. While, on positive axes, extreme performers begin to stretch athletic prowess beyond the staid confines of the arena and lido—to the mountain, to the desert, to wild waters, to simulated journeys to Mars, to space stations—in reverse, they bring cosmic unboundedness
subversively into the organized symmetry of the city. This happens increasingly when marathon runners, free runners, and skateboarders all in their own ways undo the integrity of purpose-built walls, slopes, and edges, pulling them onto the precarious planes of their own technical kinetics. In the process, the Euclidian geometry of the city is prised apart to accommodate new body practices, and the city—as well as venues made up of distant ecosystems—is invited to reconnect with the perilous curl and swirl of the essentially undisciplined universe.

It is worth noting that these emergent anthropological concerns make no virtue of a presumptive necessity to associate cosmology with the bounded worlds of the ‘non-modern.’ To the contrary, it is precisely the heightened cosmic investments of late modernity that thrusts them onto the anthropological agenda, discarding earlier fixations with holism and the characterization of cosmology as a practice of exotic others. Cosmology, per this argument, becomes peculiarly our game, where the ‘us’ designates the complex, differentiated, and variegated collectivity of all those who must reckon with life in its contemporary imbrications with neo-liberal orders.

This applies just as much to a second possibility for anthropological attention in the midst of these contemporary shifts, namely, research on the explicit production and consumption of cosmology per se. This occurs, of course, not just at professionally official sites such as NASA, CERN, university physics departments, museums, theological seminaries, and film studios—some of which loci will be ethnographically off-limits—but increasingly among both passionate amateurs and grassroots consumers. In fact, while anthropology has repeatedly borne witness to the elaborate cosmoi and cosmology making of informants abroad, of its own cosmos it has had very little to say (for reasons explained in the last section). The situation begins to change, however, when, from inside a social realm that increasingly opens out onto cosmos, increasing numbers of people begin to engage with it.

Take popular engagements with the solar system as just one example. Already an influential field in Europe and America, amateur astronomy is now burgeoning. Thus, “Amazon has reported a 500% increase in telescope sales … and subscriptions to amateur astronomy magazines, such as the BBC’s Sky at Night, are rocketing” (McKie 2012). Often obsessive to be sure, these lay scientists respond not only to the traditional lure of discovering and naming new stars and planets (and, thereby, of placing themselves celestially), but also, increasingly, to invitations from ‘real’ astronomers to take crucial measurements by proxy. Undoubtedly, the current rise of popular astronomy reflects the almost daily media coverage of discovery in the heavens and of the Hadron collider. Television cosmologists become household names. Big Bang, dark matter, and black hole books proliferate. New newspapers run cosmology columns that begin to displace traditional horoscopes, while, bolstered by dyspeptic attitudes toward science, astrology itself remains in good health (Schrempp 2012; Willis and Curry 2004).

Moreover, at the wackier—but even more popular—end, surveys show that the bulk of modern populations confidently expect (and want) life to be found elsewhere in the universe (Battaglia 2005). Many amateurs spend hundreds of hours helping professionals listen for signs of life under the very respectable auspices of SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Institute), indicating a prevalent estimation that ‘life on Earth’ is special—but not that special. More conventionally, new big powers (India, China) predictably compete (once again) to put humans on the moon, while old big powers continue to probe, photograph, and sample the mineral content of the universe and even plot lunar agricultural colonies. The privately established Artemis Project writes on its Web site: “As the lunar outpost develops and a permanent population is established, it will no longer be acceptable to import food from Earth.”

In this new conjuncture, anthropology has a lot of catching up to do in matching the popular interest in cosmos and tracking developments on the new periphery, and thus to deepen comparisons with the cosmological compulsions of others. In effect, guided by a new sensibility, an exotic
ethnography of ‘outer space’ begins to be transformed into an anthropology of open universe whose status is simultaneously real, imagined, and fictionalized, but also, above all, here and now.

We can hypothesize that a new cosmological sensibility in the anthropological heartlands sensitizes the ethnographic impulse toward cosmological sensibilities everywhere. Consequently, our third anthropological possibility redirects the couplet of theory and ethnography once again to the margins of modern governance, where, in both distributed populations and tight-knit communities, ‘becoming modern’ and striving for greater worldliness nonetheless remain projects strongly intertwined with primordial frames that have irreducibly cosmological dimensions. Hence, while for many anthropologists the indigenous cosmos will forever be a largely powerless representation, the resonant trend at the theoretical center of the discipline is even more ethnographically attuned to the plethora of ways in which foreign forms (e.g., mines, money, medicines, white persons, white gods) not only are incorporated into customary ‘ways of life’ but are radically resignified within and through existing worldviews and cosmologies (e.g., Hutchinson 1996; Kirsch 2006; Sahlins 1981; Taussig 1983).

One notes that the cosmological inflection in studies of globalization since the 1970s has productively bifurcated. One set of tracks leads to loci at which emergent modernities are predominately indigenized. In these spaces, whatever messages cling to modern values are muted or silenced precisely by their metaphorical myth recognition in life-worlds that limit real value to primordial truth and its cosmogonic renewal. In these systems, people veritably ‘know’, and what they do not know is either open to oracular divination, through some special portal of the known, or is too unimportant to bother with. By contrast, the other set of tracks leads to worlds that, at their extremities and in their deepest recesses, may be murky, unclear, unfinished, and elusive, not just to outsiders (such as the ethnographer), but also to their inhabitants. It is precisely in such quasi-intractable realms that cosmos becomes critical as the space in which truth was only ever partly revealed and within which it must be continually quested, divined, and inventively fixed for a time (Wagner 1981, 2010).

In the hierarchical, poly-cosmological image of classical anthropology with which we began this article, the periphery was effectively treated as though it was built to submit perfectly to the knowledge centers/glands of both local subjects and anthropological authorities. Where it was perceived not to do so, the periphery was considered cosmologically disordered, brutish, recessive, and utterly subject to the moral and physical disintegration that Joseph Conrad (1990) depicted for Africa, as it is assumed, in Heart of Darkness and as Michael Taussig (1987) portrayed for the Amazon. In the new conjuncture, we have sought to delineate a re-acknowledgment of an open universe and how its cultural history leads not only to complex and positive understandings of what may well turn out to be ‘epistemic murk’ (ibid.) on the periphery, but also to an appreciation that uncertainty itself is a determinate effect of what one knows. Anthropologists therefore need not necessarily anticipate either ‘closed’ or ‘open’ universes for modernities emerging elsewhere.

The second wind of interest in the study of indigenous cosmologies that anthropology is now experiencing, as we have suggested, can itself be placed in the context of this late modern investment in cosmology tout court. Once again, it seems, the anthropological imagination is being captured by that of the natives, which is to say, our informants. Except that now cosmology is no longer assumed to connote a dedicated cultural domain—reserved for total, totalizing, and always exotic discourses about the world as such—that may act either as the baseline for ‘cultural explanation’ or otherwise become itself the object of explanatory reduction. Rather, what distinguishes some of the most compelling writings in contemporary anthropology is a spirit of abiding experimentation with matters cosmological, in which novel ethnographic and analytical terrains are carved out of their multiple and ever-emergent imbrications with other
dimensions of people’s lives. These include the Vietnam War seen (also) from the point of view of its ghosts (Kwon 2008); hierarchies of global development as a function of ‘axial’ cosmologies of the transcendence of heaven (Robbins 2009); the formation of cosmos through the humor of hunting and shamanism (Willerslev and Pedersen 2010); Afro-Cuban spirits and sorcerers as affective ‘societies’ (Ochoa 2010); post-socialist society in Mongolia as a shamanic spirit world (Pedersen 2011); nomadic motility as an exercise in harnessing fortune (Empson 2011); the cosmogonic effects of material practices (Tassi and Espirito Santo 2012); and the cosmological coordinates of drug smuggling in the Andes (Kernaghan, forthcoming). For studies such as these, even to raise the question of holism (let alone a hierarchy of distinct worldviews) as anything other than a moot ethnographic question (as opposed to an analytical predilection) is altogether a categorical mistake.

Conclusion

There are three things that an anthropological program for contemporary cosmological study cannot do or be. Firstly, while it broadens the investigation of an infinitely open, expanding cosmos, the study must refrain from generalizing the decentered concept of an open, expanding universe to all modernities. Emerging modernities sit in a variety of relations to pre-existing and transforming cosmological visions, and these emergences are the subject of particular ethnographic probes. Secondly, while political relations have been transformed in ways that can be described as neo-liberal, the study decisively cannot be the comparative cataloguing of ‘neo-liberal cosmology’, establishing correlations to justify or express corresponding dominant political relations. Rather, the premise is that neo-liberal mutations in politics introduce cleavages that significantly reorient populations within existing cosmological fields, making transformations in the social imagination of the local cosmos (and, subsequently, all cosmoi) probable. And, thirdly, the study also cannot proceed from the conclusion that, in the radical opening of modern social relations to an expanding cosmos, all that remains for the social imaginary is flow, flux, fold, wave, particle, and energy, passing through human subjects as if they were merely spectral presences, unable either to impede or react. In truth, the range of ethnographic and sociological data supports the contention that, from imagination to act, what is cosmically specific about social relations and social subjects is that they can as equally cohere/organize substance and energy as institutions with their own local horizons as they can dissociate them and dissolve themselves into streams or ‘planes of consistency’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2004), merging with the most distant of horizons. This must mean that, as social actors imagine themselves to be in cosmos, so do they imagine determinate, yet alterable, horizons for the specific beings they are.

That all social relations are positioned and grounded in cosmos is, therefore, incontestable. That in all social relations there is some recognition of this grounding is likely but is a matter of anthropological investigation. That now is an opportune time for anthropologists to intensify investigations into the cultural articulations and social settings of cosmological awareness and knowledge is the principal claim of this essay.
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NOTES

1. Broadening its remit somewhat in line with the development of graduate students’ interests, the group has since been renamed as CROC—the Cosmology, Ontology, Religion and Culture Research Group. In May 2011 at UCL, CROC held an international workshop on the theme “Contemporary Cosmologies and the Cultural Imagination,” bringing together anthropologists whose work takes notions of cosmology seriously in diverse ways. The present article also represents a first attempt to provide a perspective on the deliberations of that workshop and will form the basis of our introduction to an edited volume, provisionally titled “Cosmologies: Making Contemporary Worlds,” which is based on the proceedings of the workshop.

2. Scaling upward, such social units may start from socially significant individuals or families, through clans and tribes, hamlets and villages, classes and social strata, to language groups, cultural regions, nations, or even whole continents.

3. To get a sense of how timid anthropologists’ relativism actually is, one only needs to consider the disciplinary censorship visited on those who have seriously flirted with asserting the reality credentials of indigenous cosmologies. The controversies surrounding the work of Carlos Castaneda (1968; cf. de Mille 1976) and Marcel Griaule (1975; cf. van Beek 1991) provide stark examples of this.

4. For a most recent collection that illustrates this trend, see da Col and Humphrey (2012).

5. See Chu (2010: 6) for an example of the careful embarrassment with which anthropologists now feel they must appeal to the term.

6. In twentieth-century physical orthodoxy, this overriding instability of form and identity would pertain to even the most basic categories of mass, space, speed, and time. For not only would each of these basic ontological variables lawfully co-vary (as Newton theorized) in ways that could be attributable to God in deistic frames, but the very law of their interrelations came to be seen as variable and relative to different ranges of space-time (as predicted by the theory of relativity).

7. See http://www.asi.org/adb/02/12/01/ (accessed 3 August 2012).

8. Conrad never names Africa in the novella itself, although it is telling that generations of readers have assumed that Africa is where the story takes place.

REFERENCES


