

their life form and consequently to invent new forms of life. To quote the subtitle of *Biosocial Becomings* by Tim Ingold and Gílsi Pálsson (2013), the goal is to “integrate social and biological anthropology,” which invites us to rethink the effective modes of collaboration between the social and natural sciences and to examine the ontological and deontological implications of sampling and using biomaterials. Methodologically, systematic exploration of agentive configurations would provide a useful tool for studying the social transformations that arise from the appearance of new (chemical, technological, etc.) agents and the new types of coordination they impose. In anthropology the challenge is to make intelligible a world in full transformation; as Helmreich (2009) aptly puts it, “life is being redistributed into a fluid set of relations” (8). Without disregarding the unprecedented modifications biotechnology is making to all segments of reality and to “emergent forms of life” (Fischer 2003), the theorizations developed in non-Western societies that refer to more ancient knowledge turn out to be especially well suited for interpreting the “plasticity” (Biehl 2013 [2005]) of forms of life, in particular for documenting processes of subjectivation, which biopolitical approaches have not always sufficiently considered (Farquhar and Zhang 2012).

Thus, the anthropology I am defending is pluralist: it promotes comparative analyses based on data from many fields, past as well as present, even when they use very different methods. There is continuity between the object of study—life in its “forms”—and the construction of a body of anthropological knowledge based on ethnographic studies. Just as a life form or form of life results from the double—internal and external—action that constitutes an individual or group of individuals as unique, so the anthropology of life develops on two fronts. First, rather than borrowing from outside of anthropology, from the life sciences, the idea that there is a uniform and universal conception of life—for example, giving undue weight to the notion of “life itself”—it seems preferable to systematically study the protean aspect of phenomena that depend on a multiplicity of vital processes and on the collectives into which they are integrated. Second, however, it is crucial to work to connect and organize the field internally so that the variety of knowledge and approaches does not lead to a lack of overall coherence. Like all fields, our discipline must find zones of exchange and points of balance between the various movements that animate it in order to maintain the specificity of its method and view of the world. The good news is that by choosing life, a transversal object in full mutation, as its object of study and by inventing innovative methodologies for researching and reformulating fundamental epistemological problems, anthropology has every chance of preserving a great vitality. This, of course, is on the condition that it does not abandon the stimulating description of the real for overly textual approaches that bring with them the risk of leaving us handling nothing but fossils. Words with life, then.

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Comments

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In September of 2013, Diné College in Arizona hosted a gathering sponsored by the International Indian Treaty Council, a meeting assembled under the heading “Corn Is Life.” Participants drew attention to the vital place of corn for many indigenous peoples across North and South America. Diné Hataali Avery Denny declared that “before there were human beings, before there was man and woman, there was the corn. The spirit of the corn, the corn song, the corn pollen—they were always here. Take care of your family corn. It is a sacred being. It is who we are and how we are made. Listen to that song. Learn your language. The corn is praying for you to come home and be healed” (Purdy 2013). Around the same time, in southern Mexico, the Zapatista-allied “Mother Seeds in Resistance” seed-preservation project warned that corn—and an indigenous way of life—was under threat from imported, genetically modified corn. “Mother Seeds” led its publicity with words from a Tzotzil Maya Elder from Chiapas: “During the last five centuries while our people have withstood suffering—enormous sufferings—our corn has allowed us to survive. Now our corn is suffering and we must give back to the corn what it has given us . . . we must help the corn withstand its suffering from the transgenic infections brought on by the greed of the transnational corporations and the bad governments” (Schools for Chiapas 2013). Corn, in these statements, is a life form—an organic being—as well as a form of life—a summoning sociality that is made up, here, of healing as well as suffering.

What is life? Explicit and implicit in the declarations just above is this answer: corn is life. That answer offers a perhaps unexpected but, I hope, complementary way into Perig Pitrou’s compelling analysis of his ethnographic work among the Mixe of Oaxaca, Mexico—work that had him tracking the configuration of agencies involved in the emergence of new Mixe human life. When babies arrive into Mixe sociality, Pitrou reports, their way is prepared by ritual craftings and feedings of corn dough figurines and by the feeding of babies

with corn tamales. Corn is key to Mixe life forms and forms of life. It is an element in what Pitrou calls the “agentive configuration” that gathers together forces that permit vitality to manifest.

In offering his account of a birth ritual, Pitrou hopes to contribute to an “anthropology of life,” advancing an analytic frame for thinking across variations in conceptions of “life,” whether these be religious, scientific, economic, or, indeed, those of anthropological apprehension and preoccupation. He hopes anthropologists can capture something general about how humans construe “life”—with “life” understood not as a stable thing-in-itself but rather as a configuration of agencies and processes to do with animating causalities and with the ritual and empirical crafting of the contours of living entities. The project, then, has comparative goals, recalling debates in anthropology about whether the discipline can aspire toward the “nomothetic” (formulating laws) or whether it might better be understood as “idiographic” (describing particularities that may have no covering law). On my reading, Pitrou suggests that the time might be right to make a push back toward the nomothetic (contra Kroeber, pace Descola). But he is also keen not to reestablish a universal claim about “life,” as he suggests that writers such as Ingold (2011) and Kohn (2013) have lately done. He also partitions the task into one that has three levels, asking (with apologies to Malinowski) what people do (about vitality), what people say/think they do (about vitality), and what anthropologists (of various methodical stripes) say people say/think they do about vitality. The approach, then, is pragmatic, not ontological.

Pitrou’s account of ethnotheories of life among the Mixe zeros in on a nonhuman entity known as “He Who Makes Being Alive,” called on in sacrifices to corn dough figurines and credited with imbuing human beings with vitality. We learn that this gendered male agent acts in sync with a feminine agent, “The Expanse, the Surface of the Earth,” and also with another masculine agent, “The One Whose Activity Is to Have Ideas, The One Who Builds.” Here, I wanted to learn more about the tangle of sex, gender, and procreation that is or is not in play. Thinking of the masculinity of the Mixe “He Who Makes Being Alive,” I was put in mind of Sandra Ott’s (1981) detection of parallels in the coming into being of people and of cheese in the cosmology of Basque shepherds, for whom sperm and rennet are both understood as masculine (agnatic?) principles of creation and identity-bestowing formation. Are there similarities between Ott’s case and Pitrou’s (especially given the material nourishing activities of mothers and godmothers in Pitrou’s account)—something ready for the kind of cross-cultural comparison in which Pitrou is interested? Is the Catholic crosshatching of Mixe beliefs important for the sex/gender/generation story? Or is something different, differently “transversal,” going on?

Pitrou’s brilliant discussion of *difrasismo*, a Mesoamerican grammatical form that bumps two terms up against one another to create a new meaning, may offer an intriguing way

in. Pitrou tells us that “‘sit down, stand,’ [is] a *difrasismo* the Mixe translate by ‘to live’”—thereby pointing to a form of life (a *habitus*, perhaps) as that which gives form to “life” or “living.” A *difrasismo*, then, is a kind of “agentive configuration,” a bundling together of actions to produce fresh phenomena. In the “sit down, stand” case (“Only humans sit down, that is, adopt a posture culturally determined and associated with commensality or hospitality”), Pitrou tells us, the *difrasismo* flags a “transverse concept at the intersection of the biological and the social.”

I wonder, too, whether the *difrasismo*-agentive configuration analytic can help us to think about how life forms and forms of life of corn reach from the intimate birth rituals of the Mixe to the wider world of indigenous worries about genetically modified corn with which I opened. In Mexico, the biopolitics of corn have become enmeshed in configurations of transnational agencies (Fitting 2011) as more and more corn is imported rather than local (Hayden 2003), a fact that has generated national and indigenous worries about what can count as proper biosocial sovereignty when it comes to maize (Hartigan 2013; Wanderer 2014). If corn is life, what agentive configurations are changing the pragmatics of its translocal, biosocial, biocapitalized entity today?

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Pitrou’s objective is to contribute to the development of an anthropology of life. To achieve this he proposes the value of a “pragmatics-based approach,” by which he refers to combining varied theoretical approaches together with non-Western theories of life to formulate “a general analytic framework.” I am not wholly convinced by this proposal, but I will come back to that below. First, I would like to focus on what I see as the article’s main contribution, which emerges directly from the author’s ethnography.

The focus on “life” pushed me to think about what we mean by this concept that we so frequently employ, within anthropology and without, as if it were unproblematic, clearly defined, and universal. In particular, I was led to reflect on how life is usually conceived in the modern West and by extension in science: as divided three ways among biological life (“life form”) and social life (“form of life”), with the individual’s mind, consciousness, or life-course (“my/your/his/her life”) somewhere in between. These three are also layered or ordered. Biological life comes first in that it can exist independently of the other two, which is why the qualifier “biology” sounds redundant. Next comes individual consciousness, which is constructed on biology but can exist independently of the social. Finally, social life is built by biological individuals on

in *Race and History*, is to strike a balance so that all collective forms of life can remain unique and distinct, without developing to the detriment of others. This is why, even when it concerns only an individual and his or her family, nothing is more (cosmobio)political than a rite of birth.

To sum up, as the commentators have helped me better understand, a coherent project for an anthropology of life should develop a theory of action—local and global, human and nonhuman—that allows us to tackle the many levels where vital processes are involved: organic, interactional, ecological, and political.

—Perig Pitrou

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