

Provocations

The Monograph is Dead. Long Live the Monograph!

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Max Gluckman, social anthropologist and founder of the Manchester School, in his well-known interpretation of Hilda Kuper's ethnographic work on the Swazi Ncwala ritual in south-east Africa, identifies the most important national ceremony as a sort of ideal type of a 'ritual of rebellion'. His analysis is based on the sacred *simemo* songs which are performed and dramatized in the Ncwala and appear to insult, reject and generally blaspheme the Swazi King. Gluckman's reading of the songs is that they are 'rituals of rebellion' which while blaspheming the king, are nevertheless in praise of kingship. Andrew Apter calls these ritual insults 'dispraises' and the ritual that lasts all night, alternates between praise and dispraises.

This provocation is offered in the spirit of those Swazi Ncwala rituals, and the arguments below will be the *simemo* songs that alternate between praise and dispraise. This is in Gluckman's spirit, where he, drawing on Aristotle, defines rebellions as 'attacks on personnel of the office, not the office itself' i.e. 'The King is Dead. Long Live the King'. Here, if we take the office to be ethnographic writing, we direct our dispraise to an officer who dominates that writing: the high ranking and demanding King of Writing: the monograph. The following discussion is therefore in praise and dispraise of the kingly monograph and the political economy of His reign.

Commiserations

First, in praise of the Monograph.

The monograph is the touchstone of anthropological scholarship, demonstrating the defining characteristics of the discipline. First and foremost, its holism, touching on all aspects of social life. Further, a monograph demonstrates long-term engagement with a field site during which life has played out in its complexity over an annual cycle and more. Just as we stay for long periods in the field, so does the monograph reflect this commitment. The length of an ethnographic monograph allows for thick description which enables the presentation of characters and ideas in multiple contexts. Rather than the strictures of the standard eight or ten thousand word article, in which so much is left unwritten or edited out, the monograph allows us to carefully display our wares, providing the opportunity for deep dives into theory, history and context, to elaborate on concepts and to fully support our argument with 'thick description' and evidence that unfolds over the chapters. Far more than an article, the conclusions of a monograph allow for inductive reasoning to flourish such that contributions to

anthropological theory emerge from the evidence and data presented, to expand the conceptual vocabulary of the discipline, while adding complexity to existing ones.

Like writing, reading a monograph is an immersive experience, in which one stays with the author as they unfold a whole universe to us, patiently and without rushing, just like ethnographic fieldwork. Reading in this way is a form of slow learning, deeply nutritious, not informational fast food, gulped down fast and apt to cause indigestion. Ideally (for let us not forget that monarchs are as much imaginary figures as real people) during reading one becomes deeply familiar with the ethnography's characters and landscapes. The best monographs stay with us, like old friends, referred to throughout our careers in our teaching, thinking and writing. How could we imagine challenging the supremacy of this, our most precious form?

We shall return to reading. First, more praise. Like all sovereigns, the Monograph bestows honours and prestige to his followers. Articles are good, we tell our PhD students and postdocs. An article or two in a well-regarded journal might help get one get a fellowship or assistant professorship. But to solidify a career, particularly to get tenure and promotion and to truly 'arrive', the Monograph is all. It is the Monograph which transforms a junior academic into an 'author', the prime marker of prestige, particularly if the publisher is one of the great university presses. That this state of affairs is pretty much the same now as it was at the start of our careers in the 1990s shows just how deeply revered and well established the Monograph is.

In sum, anthropologist populate a realm in which the Monograph is sovereign and other officers – the journal article, book chapter, edited volume, seminar paper, report, blog and so on - occupy the lower rungs of the hierarchy. True, there are a few anthropological ancestors whose stars shone bright in the absence of publishing a monograph, but they were few and far between (and often female). Yet just because the Monograph has always ruled, should we accept this state of affairs? Moreover, if we don't, how should we write? As we turn to our 'dispraise', we invite you to decide whether what is required is a 'ritual of rebellion', or something more revolutionary.

So, the dispraise:

The first and most obvious problem with the Monograph is that by occupying the top rank of anthropological writing, it is an elitist product, borne into being by an elitist system. Since Malinowski's *Argonauts*, the canon (if there is such a thing – perhaps the subject for another Provocation) and its core form - the Monograph - were predominantly produced by white men with plenty of time on their hands. Enabled by colonialism, with neither heavy teaching and administrative loads, nor caring responsibilities, previous generations of anthropologists were time rich, able to spend long periods in the field and / or writing. To this extent, the Monograph in its inception is male and white. Seen in this light, its contemporary veneration indicates that our

attempts to decolonise remain superficial, for despite much lip-service across the discipline, it remains pinnacle of anthropological endeavour, rewarded by jobs, prizes and grants. In contrast, the decolonising moves of collaboration via multi authored pieces, edited online journal volumes, blogs, co-authorship with interlocuters and so on, rank far below. If the Monograph is King, these alternative forms of writing, usually freely available online, are republican rebels, seeking his overthrow.

Perhaps a revolution is not required; rather, we witness a slow decline as the King struggles in the current political economy of Higher Education. The state of the neo liberal post-Brexit British university make conditions increasingly tough for would-be monograph writers. University vacations were once time for fieldwork and writing, but with increased administrative burdens, exam marking and care responsibilities, uninterrupted time to immerse oneself is scarce. At best, one can work on an article-length piece of writing. This is particularly challenging for authors of a second or third book, for the first monograph is based on the PhD which took 4-5 years plus a further few years refining it. It is often impossible to find that kind of time again.

The material conditions of publication have also changed. In recent decades university Presses have undergone a revolution in their practices. With digital publishing becoming the norm, the process now involves them doing an initial print run but recovering any costs and making their sales through sales of their e-books to libraries. Once this period is over, they do next to no work in promoting the book, entering it for prizes, having it reviewed, taking it to anything but the largest conferences and so on. It therefore falls to the author to do all the work in ensuring the book is read and reviewed. With increasing neo-liberal norms in the publishing houses, in-house copy editors and editorial teams have been replaced by global contract workers, who are often unaware of editorial conventions, in-house styles or indeed content knowledge. Publishing a monograph therefore demands constant attention from the author long after the final manuscript has been submitted.

As the above indicates, whilst writing is core to anthropological praxis, it is also deeply political. The challenges we've outlined are exacerbated by race, gender and class. Embracing alternative forms of writing is thus to open the discipline to anthropologists who haven't followed the traditional route of a fully funded PhD in a prestigious university in the Global North. These colleagues may come from different pedagogic traditions less fixated on long form writing; they may have caring responsibilities; they may be so overloaded with teaching on short term contracts that book writing is an impossible goal.

Meanwhile, the goal posts within the university are also shifting – to a certain extent. Hiring and promotion committees are increasingly open to CVs which don't feature monographs. At the LSE, the criteria for promotion to full professor is based around four submitted publications, of which at least two should be 'world leading'. There is no

specific mention of books. In fact, a monograph qualifies for the same points as an article, so for example, whilst a monograph is likely to be awarded the top rank 4 (outstanding) in the REF, a world leading article may be given the same score. All this means that the unassailable position of the monograph is slipping and there are no quantifiable reasons for writing a monograph. The Political Economy that sustained it is crumbling.

What about the readers? In the UK open access rules mean that whilst many journal articles are open to all, monographs tend to be harder to source. Many are hugely expensive – only academics with access to research funds (or a large salary) can afford to buy them, and only registered, fee paying students are able to access them via university libraries. Until recently, few academic book publishers would agree to making a book open access. The new REF 2029 rules stipulate that monographs published after a certain date must be open access, but what this means is that once again, the political economy of academic writing tilts towards the elite. Since universities have to pay publishers for open access, it is wealthier institutions and the academics whose work they support, whose monographs will be made available. The only winner here are corporatised publishers.

Even if one could get hold of a monograph, would one actually read it? Whilst we all idealise the single authored book, the reality is that many of us only read some in detail, and even this is likely to involve considerable skimming. Today few undergraduate courses include whole books. If they do, they are read in small chunks, week by week, or included as background, certainly not as essential reading for our equally time pressed students. Meanwhile, AI bites at our heels, reducing so much to a soundbite or frothy, impressive sounding verbiage.

So, why bother? By dispraising the King are we in danger of undermining the whole anthropological endeavour – i.e. ethnographic writing, and indeed, anthropology? No monarchy is fixed in time. Whilst acknowledging its elitist history and the challenges it faces, should the Monograph be embraced and held dear as a challenge to a far more important threat: misinformation, a McNuggets style of higher education and the constant, brain fuzzing, distractions of technology or mangled AI produced 'knowledge'? Here, rather than being associated with the elitist past, in the current context the Monograph should be understood as radical via its insistence on deeper, slower reading and comprehension. Rather than eschewing the arduous process of writing books, should we insist on the monograph as a challenge to endless speed and over production? If so, we would need a publishing model in which online access is guaranteed and enough time for academics to actually write them. After all, how could we – as academics and anthropologists – seriously be threatening to overthrow our most hallowed and revered form?

Over to you.