Bjørn Enge Bertelsen, Synnøve Bendixsen

Critical Anthropological Engagements in Human Alterity and Difference.


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Published in 2017, this book was released as part of Palgrave Macmillan’s series on “approaches to Social inequality and difference”, which aims to analyse “how difference is produced, governed and reconfigured in a rapidly changing world”. Whilst the book’s title, Critical Anthropological Engagements in Human Alterity and Difference, essentially encompasses all things anthropological, the book has a clear focus on engaging with recent conversations around the so-called “ontological turn” in anthropology and reflects the ambition to invigorate conversations around the meta themes of the discipline, namely representation, difference, and writing about people. The book spans 301 pages plus front matter and index and comprises twelve chapters with a short postscript by Adam Reed. The book emerges from a self-declared “theory-driven project” titled “Denaturalizing Difference: Challenging the Production of Global Social Inequality” based out of the social anthropology department of the University of Bergen, Norway. As such, the book’s contributors, Adam Reed (postscript) aside, are all based in Norwegian institutions, particularly Bergen, where the editors are based.

The introductory chapter by Bertelson and Bendixsen sets the tone of book by focusing on the lineage of the ontological turn and situating the recent debates around ontology within anthropology’s “long standing concern for auto critique” (5). The book takes its perspective on the ontological turn from discussions that are well summarised by Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen (2017), who have been central figures in these debates. The ontological turn proposes a radical methodological openness that argues for an anthropology less of how people inhabit the world, but rather how many worlds are inhabited by people. That is, the turn seeks an anthropology that, as to the meta questions of the subject, asks: How do we write about other ontological ways of being human? The volume’s strength
comes from seeing how such debates, often working at the meta end of the discipline's theorising, work in ethnographically grounded writings.

Bertelson and Bendixsen do an excellent job of reviewing the range of work on the turn and setting the scope of the discussion out for the reader. They balance their review with a solid consideration of the critiques of the turn, a balance that can be found throughout the book. They carve the book into three sections – Vistas, Materialities, and Politics. “Vistas”, they state, aims to “pay attention to the study of cosmological formations that are understood as fundamentally perspective-generating or ontogenetic systems”, and has been influenced by the work of Viveiros de Castro and associated work on perspectivism. They state the focus of “Materialities” takes its influence from Thinking Through Things, in which Henare et al. assert “things might be treated as sui generis meanings” (2007:3-4, P17), and also from the work of Annemarie Mol, whose The Body Multiple (2002) considers how medical practice enacts the objects of its concern. The final section, “Politics” emphasises ontological difference or alterity as the discipline salvages “anthropology from the funeral pyre of an idea of a singular, universal and exceptional Anthropos” (20). However, the chapters can be read in any order and do not necessarily reflect the strong section frames outlined in the introductory chapter. In fact, it seems most chapters could have fitted into almost any section as these vistas, materialities, and politics are all themes central to the ontological debates.

Signe Howell opens the “Vistas” section with a consideration of “The relationality of species in Chewong animistic ontology” that argues against current strands in post-human thought and for human exceptionalism and commensality (45), suggesting that the capacity to anthropomorphise is a human universal. Cecile Vindal Odegaard aims to understand the ontological dynamics of Amazonian Kharisiris, which, she argues, must be understood within ontological frames of Andean notions of earth beings as powerful, non-human, shape-shifting beings. Odegaard emphasises ontological “dynamics” as a frame of analysis over an analysis of an ontological “scheme” in order to assess “where boundaries are precariously unstable and uncertain” (76), and draws on Stathern’s notion of partial connections and Mol’s overlapping worlds to do so. Kari Telle then focuses on blasphemy trails in Lombok as a site of religion making, arguing that the courtroom is an important site in sculpting religious orthodoxy and power. Focuses her analysis on “ontological conflicts” (90), Telle asserts that, in regard to the defining angels, spirits and the divine, “everyone in the courtroom would likely agree that these beings are situated across the ontological divide” (91). The chapter could have gone further into this argument to really explore if these ontological conflicts were more than epistemological conflicts. The focus on conflict and how particular worldviews are erased is a commendable analytic frame that works well with the theoretical propositions of the ontological turn. Jon Henrik Zieglar Remme’s chapter concludes the “Vistas” section and continues the exploration of the instability of ontological worlds through his study of Ifugao animism in the Philippines. Considering the “otherwise within”, Remme asks what scholarly contributions of the ontological turn “open up” and “close down” for anthropology as a whole. Grounding his thoughts via his own ethnographic work of relations between human and non-human beings, Remme’s chapter contributes a well-balanced and considered rumination of thinking ontologically. Specifically, he offers a stimulating consideration of the permeability of ontological boundaries by bringing analytic attention to how worlds become and maintain themselves. Here, Remme leans on the works of Povinelli and her discussion of worlds otherwise (see 2011), and frames the ongoing dynamics of othering (116) as practice of stabilising and destabilising ontological entities.
The “Materialities” section of the book opens with Christian Sørhaug’s analysis of Warao households as assemblages where homemaking is read as a form of worldmaking. Here, Sørhaug takes us on a journey through the many “threads” of the ontological turn in his consideration of emergent, agentive and also external relations of the Warao home. Using Mol, Viveriros de Castro and many others, Sørhaug considers the home as an ever-emergent assemblage into which things move in and out and are placed in different relations to each other, as way of enacting a sociality that mingles the old and the new ways of Warao life. Then, Lars Gjelstad explores boundaries between general and particular domains of knowledge, specifically the relation between academic and vocational learning. Gjelstad asserts that a dominant “culturalist” approach in the anthropology of education helps to reinforce a naturalisation of propositional knowledge. Gjelstad explores post-representational theory and theories of relational ontologies in the practice of doing critical ethnography of education. In chapter eight, Are John Knudsen cites no less than 13 works by Tim Ingold in order to take a deep consideration and analyse the strengths and weaknesses of Ingold’s position. Knudsen pays attention to Ingold’s break with a language-centred epistemology and his Heideggerian-influenced notion of dwelling. Knudsen’s consideration of realist versus relativist positions offers some interesting ruminations of recent anthropological positions on understanding the being aspect of human being. He argues that Ingold’s emphasis on dwelling provides a theoretical middle ground as it supports the ontological turn’s dismissal of cultured worldviews, but also rejects the claim for distinct worldviews that are incommensurable. Knudsen sees merit in Ingold’s placing of the perceiving body at front and centre of an analysis, which, Knudsen claims, rejects Cartesian dualisms of mind-body and nature-culture (182). Whilst Ingold’s work has received much attention elsewhere, it is interesting to see it counterposed with the questions the ontological turn has thrown up. This allows Knudsen to offer a critique on both the turn and the anthropological project in general.

Martin Thomassen opens the final section, “Politics”, via a consideration of visual art exhibitions as a site of “ontic violence”, leaning on James Clifford’s consideration of the exhibition as a “contact zone” (1997). Thomassen argues that global art spaces offer ways of anticipating new ways to capacitate difference through radical relational practice, which, he claims, has the capacity to destabilise ontological grounds. Kathinka Frøystad offers a stimulatingly provocative chapter that critiques the ontological turn’s tendency to analyse cosmologies as distinct worlds, and aims to shift analytical focus from “different worlds to cosmic worlding” (231). Tackling the work of some of the turn’s most vocal writers, Frøystad argues that certain forms of analysis produce “ontological prisons” in which fields of analysis are shrunk so as to make “overlaps, porousness, and crossings disappear almost completely from view” (233). This field “shrinkage” may, she argues, inadvertently close the forms of ontological plurality that the turn seeks to engender through overly prescriptive forms of analysing what “the other” is. Further, Frøystad argues that such a form of focused ontological analysing reflects a Christian or Abrahamic bias, thus turning an ontological analysis onto the turn itself. Frøystad emphasises the porousness and “sponge like” (240) capacity of Hinduism to absorb other practices in order to “learn lessons” about understanding and living with otherness. It is this form of brave and provocative scholarship that has led to such invigorating discussions about anthropology regardless of one’s stand on the “turn”. In chapter eleven, Astrid B. Stensrud takes us to the Peruvian Andes via Rancière’s perspectives on politics and Strathearn’s ideas of partial connections. Stensrud uses Mol’s emphasis on heterogeneous relational practice in order to avoid essentialist traps of ethnographic analysis. Through a consideration of the politics of water irrigation techniques, Stensrud
brings our attention to how ontological frictions play out in everyday practice. The chapter runs through some of the core themes of the book’s critiques and uses of the ontological turn through solid ethnographic writing. This style reflects the overall approach and strength of the book. The final substantial chapter before Reed’s postscript is Eldar Bråten’s direct engagement with the work of Martin Holbraad, in particular his discussion of the concept of truth in his monograph Truth in Motion. Taking influence from Roy Bhaskar (1997), Bråten aims to shift emphasis from a focus on truth to the relationship between truth and doubt. Echoing critiques that can be found earlier in the volume, Bråten evokes a realist position, looking at the ways in which notions of truth are fought over (284), again bringing attention not to different worlds but rather the conflicts, contrasts and in/commensuration between them.

Overall the book is a timely and welcome contribution to discussions about the meta frame of anthropological enquiry. Its strength is its foundation in a wide range of ethnographic field sites and the way the authors scale from their specific enquiries out into wider current debates in anthropology. It is this sort of dynamism that serves the discipline well. Whilst opinions on the validity of critique and approach will differ between readers, all will find a form of energised engagement that characterises the ontological turn and the writing that it has led to.

References