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Article abstract

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Article / Article hors thème

Our "Event-Full" World... the Challenge to an Anthropologist

Robert Paine *

This article[1] makes a case for "event anthropology" in today's world. "Event" is distinguished from "happening" and the characteristics of the world in which anthropology is situated today are delineated; the essay then turns to illustrative case-histories in Norway and Israel. These highlight the increasing frequency of "under"-understood events and associated senses of powerlessness on the one hand, and on the other, the place of *invention* in the conditions of contemporary modernity – not just in response to events but also in their making. Attention is paid to the crumbling of group solidarity as an anthropological axiom.

Cet article présente "l'anthropologie de l'événement" dans le monde contemporain. On y fait une distinction entre "événement" et "fait culturel," et on y présente les caractéristiques du monde contemporain qui sert de contexte à l'anthropologie; on illustre par l'étude de cas norvégiens et israëliens. Ces exemples soulignent la fréquence toujours croissante des événements "mé-" compris ainsi que, d'une part, le sentiment d'impuissance qui y est associé, et d'autre part, l'importance de l'invention dans les conditions de la modernité contemporaine – non seulement comme réaction aux événements mais aussi au moment de leur production. On porte attention à la désintégration du concept de solidarité de groupe comme axiome anthropologique.

This article is about the meaning of *event*, finding meanings *in* events, and the pressing relevance of these issues for contemporary anthropological research. I shall begin with a theoretical position, wander into a brief critique of the anthropology in which I was brought up (we study ancestor worship, our practice is another matter), and then move to application.

Before venturing forth I should explain that anthropologists, even among ourselves, are not sure these days what "culture" *is* or *is not* – our "post-modern" mess if you like. So one wonders what others make of us. I have an anecdote on that.

Some years back now, I had put together a colloquium group to discuss political speech. We were all anthropologists, except one, Peter, a historian and a fine scholar. Over drinks after the two days, I asked Peter what he thought of us anthropologists.

> _ "Well," he said, "I'll leave anthropol*ogists* out of it but I'll tell you my impression of anthropol*ogy* ... You know those chocolate boxes, like Black Magic, with chocolates of different centres? There's the nutty one ...
>
> _ "*Nutty*? Philosophy perhaps?" I said.
>
> _ "Just so," said Peter. "And there's the nougat one."
>
> _ "Like er ... getting properly stuck into a bit of constitutional history?" Peter nodded. I was catching on.
>
> _ "And then [said Peter] there's the squishy one – soft and squishy. When you try to bite it, it goes all over the place. *That's* my impression of anthropology."
>
> I quickly poured myself another drink.

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1. WHAT IS AN EVENT?

An event is to be distinguished from a mere happening. In sociological parlance, *an event is a happening that we give meaning to* (Molotch and Lester, 1974: 102; Moore, 1987: 729; Sahlins, 1983: 153; Strathern, 1990:27). A passing rain shower when we're out walking the dog is not an event, but when it rains at the behest of a rain-maker it is. And should it pour cats and dogs on [St. John's] Regatta Day,[2] that is a happening that has repercussions on an event (Regatta Day) and so, one may say, it is eventful rain too, but in quite another way to the rainmaker's rain.

Now, it is the rain-at-the-Regatta, rather than Regatta Day itself or even the rainmaker, that interests me. Beyond the notion of event as something we enter into our diaries and which is scripted in advance, there is also event as a trail of significance emerging from a happenstance. Whereas institutional events support routine, in fact *are* the routine, the events that emerge from happenstance are likely to be disruptive of routine, of the normative: in fact, of structure.

"Rain-at-the-Regatta" may just seem too trivial an issue to bother much with in the times that are now upon us, and I will indeed raise the stakes later on. For the moment, though, my point is that small events – or events in small worlds – are ideal laboratories for learning about the making of events. Furthermore, the odd happening, however small, may not, of course, be happenstance at all but quite deliberate: it may be in deliberate opposition to the routine and the normative and with the purpose of dismantling existing structures.

2. OUR "EVENT-FULL" WORLD?

In what ways is this true of "our" world, that of us late millennium moderns, as opposed to the worlds of earlier times – even, in some respects, of but a generation or so ago? I think there are several strands to the answer.

1. The first concerns *change in a theory of knowledge*. The change is historical. As I am not an historian, I am not going to risk getting my chronology wrong, and I leave the "when" wide open (it doesn't matter much in the present context). Let me cite an historian for what I have in mind:

   [The theory of knowledge of an earlier time] claimed that the external world and all human life was legible... Understanding the world... was dependent upon the interpretation of a determined canon of texts... When experience directly contradicted the text, it was the experience... which was likely to be denied or at least obscured (Pagden, 1993: 12,52,53).

   Thus the actually unknown shore that Columbus reached was *not* unknown to him. He "knew" it before he left the European shore; his landfall *had to be* the eastern coast of Asia. Today, we still have trouble, be it in the natural sciences or the social sciences or the humanities, with knowing the unknown by any route other than the already known. But we know that not all is known. Nor are we necessarily in thrall to a "determined canon" that puts a lock on alternative meanings being attributed to a happening. Today, it is commonplace for a range of meanings to be attached to the same happening: one happening, several events, all without the stale breath of heresy hanging over us (Paine, 1995a).

2. Next, as the sociologist Anthony Giddens put it, there is our "*capability to disturb the fixity of things*, to "open up new pathways, and thereby colonize a segment of a novel future" (Giddens, 1991: 133).

   This means that as we open up new horizons – new dimensions of our mastery of the universe – we may be offered more *possible* choices. However, mistakes are made too; either we overstep the limit of our competence or we leave ourselves unaware of the full consequence of our actions. In this way there is deliberate playing with risk which is different from the pre-determined notion of fate. Blundering about, a hole is knocked through the ozone layer or we bring down on ourselves such disasters as Chernobyl or we empty the ocean of cod.

3. Then there is the *electronic revolution* which stretches space and shrinks time (Innis, 1951). Among the many implications of this (I choose just one) is that more unexpected happenings blow into all our particular corners of the globe than ever before. Vicarious experiencing is raised to new heights, and with it

the problem of what is "real" and what is one's own world (Paine, 1992a; 1992b). Notice that one cumulative effect from all that I have mentioned thus far about "our" world is that happenings abound, waiting, so to speak, to be adopted as events.

4. There is one more dimension to all this that I want to mention, and in the context of this article it is the most important. That is, namely, the *acceptance in the social sciences* that we are indeed living in an event-full world.

Here, however, I really should only speak about anthropology. Perhaps economists, for example, have always dealt with happenings and their putative transformation into events ... even with forecasting events. No wonder they often get things wrong! But it has been a far more lively pursuit than anthropology, in this respect.

Anthropologists were principally interested in happenings that repeat themselves and underwrite normalcy and the normative. Ritual, a favourite anthropological topic, was seen as "the reenactment and thus the reexperiencing of known form" (Geertz, 1983: 28). Case-histories were pressed into service to illustrate classes of happenings which have fixed beginnings, middles, and endings and are thereby exempted from "the untidiness of everyday life" (Rosaldo, 1984: 185). The very notion of "process" was commonly reduced to ideas of sequence, maturation, and regeneration. We wrote in what was called "the ethnographic present" thus imposing a timeless, changeless condition on our subjects while our own world was anything but timeless or changeless (Fabian, 1983).

Mark well, however, that our generational predecessors who set this fashion for us were participants in *anthropology's* Age of Discovery when the world of Other cultures – the so-called primitive world for the most part – was being mapped (beginning in earnest in the early decades of this century and continuing almost up to the present). But still, they were not bound, in the manner of a Columbus, to a canon. On the "farthest shores" that these anthropologists visited and lived for a while, they would find, for example, *order* in seeming anarchy and *reason* in seeming unreason (Gellner, 1981: xiv). Let us remember them as *enlightened* explorers for they showed "how what we take to be the foundations of genuinely human life manages to exist without the assistance of our institutions" (Geertz, 1988: 69).

But then, they would encase it all in "structure." Divining the structure often bespoke considerable intellectual originality. The price of that originality, however, was that, once it was in place, everything that happened on-the-ground was to be understood in terms of the principles of the structure. At this point the procedure did take on a canonical look. In short, anthropology inclined towards giving itself epistemological privilege over the self-knowledge of its native subjects.

Typically, these "social structures" as they were called (the phrase *almost* has an antediluvian ring to it today!) were holistic (another password of the time) and therefore complete, raised on their own exclusive logic. This meant that, on the whole, they tended towards analytic impregnability. And they existed in a singularly event-*less* "world," not of course because the real world was such but because in this analytical mode there was little or no place for happenings out of which events are generated.

It was, then, an anthropology full of rainmakers and dry Regattas, but not of rain-at-the-Regatta: for events of that kind we had to wait a while. My eyes, at any rate, were opened to the "events era" of anthropology with an article about the problems of burying an *atheist* in Moslem Java (Geertz, 1959)! As for the political world surrounding the sites of anthropological description, there could be massacres and insurrections, but if these did not "belong" to the native social structure as constructed by the anthropologist, they were not likely to be mentioned.

One also had to wait until after World War II for "ethnographies" of the consequences of natural disasters like typhoons and hurricanes (Schneider, 1957; Spillius, 1957). Before that time, disasters were generally seen as "breaks in pattern," as "isolated and annoying interruptions of norms," and as "unique happenings hanging in a sort of conceptual limbo" (Wallace, 1956: 15). However, today disaster settings are likened by some of us to "natural laboratories" for testing "a medley of social theories" (Torry, 1979: 29). That, then, is my discipline (and long may it live!), or that *was* my discipline (slightly caricatured) even when I was a student. I'm aghast at my iconoclasm, but I have a thesis to make! The notion "Our Event-Full World" is in line with the epistemological revolution, underway for a few years now, in anthropology. So I now make the abrupt turn to "application" with some case-studies of my own in

what I like to call "event anthropology." As intimated already, my sights are not set on global as BIG but global as LOCAL – an important paradox of our day. In other words, the playing out of local events in the context of our present condition of intrusive globalism strikes me as a worthy challenge, though here I can, at the best, be no more than suggestive about it.

3. SAAMI: HUNGER-STRIKE

I made my first field trip among the Saami of Norway while I was a graduate student at Oxford, and my early writings were in the mold that I have just been describing. After two books, I'm an ethnographic authority. However, with the hunger-strike in 1979, I entered into a new learning process concerning this culture that I had lived in, married into, and written about (Paine, 1985). Indeed, it was the beginning of a learning process for me about the ontology of "culture" itself. I return to that point in a moment.

The first thing to note is the location of the hunger-strike. The strike took place not in "Lapland" but in Oslo where six young Saami, in traditional dress, erected a tent on the lawn opposite the parliament building. They came in protest against parliament's decision to dam a river in the far north which flowed through Saami ancestral territory and reindeer pastures (Paine, 1982). After a week, the Prime Minister came out of the parliament building and walked over to the hunger-strikers and their animated Norwegian supporters; authorization for the dam was temporarily put on hold.

Secondly, not only was there no Saami tradition connected to hunger-strikes, it was, I believe, the first hunger-strike, as a public demonstration, in Scandinavia. Whence the idea then? It sprang directly from the so-called Fourth World of Aboriginal Peoples and the politics of turning physical powerlessness into moral power and then putting that to good political account. The precedents for the Saami tent outside parliament in Oslo were the "embassy tents" (as they were called) of other Fourth Worlders in Canberra and Washington D.C. a few years earlier. They bore witness to the quickly emerging dramatic sense (at that time) of globalism among peoples heretofore counted – or rather, discounted – as standing alone out on the peripheries.

What we might coin as the choreographic key to the power of this particular ethnodrama lay with the bringing together of "tent" and "parliament." Separately, they are intuitively recognized as metonyms of Saami and Norwegian society, respectively. By physically juxtaposing them, the Saami Action Group (as they called themselves) succeed in provoking a number of questions about the way the two societies are alike and unalike, equal and unequal. People (not least Norwegians) began to see the tent as the structural equivalent of parliament, thus evoking thoughts of complementarity as much as of opposition and mutual exclusion.

If the moral key to the power of the strike lay in the symbolism of the powerlessness of the hungry, its political power – accumulating with the passing of each day – arose out of the fact that instead of shaping themselves to the politically dominant reality of the world outside, the strikers shaped *it* to themselves: they attained *their* reality in the very act of portraying it. Thus this handful of young Saami, accomplishing what had evaded their formal political organizations for decades, *taught* the Norwegians (note the historical role reversal) who crowded around their tent, how government policy towards the Saami had been out of step with the normative values of Norwegian liberal democracy. Many were led to reevaluate.

The Action Group also emphasized *differences* between Saami and Norwegian cultures: the crowds learned that this difference must be afforded respect and allowed to continue. The message was passed (through the interaction between the crowds and the Action Group) to every Norwegian home with a television set.

However, many a Saami household in the north of the country also have television, certainly radio and newspaper reportage, and the hunger-strike exposed rents in the ethnographically seamless garment of "the Saami culture." Many Saami were horrified at these young Saami demonstrators down in the capital over what they saw as their brash opposition to the Norwegian state, running to expressions of ungratefulness, even disloyalty. And *the tent*! "How dare these young people let the Norwegians suppose we all still live in tents these days!"

I would like to draw some general points from this case. Doing the ethnography of this event

started me thinking about the emerging view that culture is always "in the making" (for example, Clifford and Marcus, 1986). Far from being a device "giving us ready-made solutions to our problems" (Kluckhohn, 1962: 25), it has "frayed edges... contradictions ... blank spots ... weaknesses" (Cottom, 1989: 100). Culture as canon is out.

The lessons I drew from the hunger-strike are the following: as an event, it falls outside the routine; people seek answers and knowledge is gained; and we "re-make" some part of ourselves through "re-makings" in our culture (Paine, 1992b). Unexpected and certainly unpredictable happenings beg for explanation; so by concentrating on them, the social scientist has a chance to see how people re-compose themselves and their "culture," a process that is continuous but not always too evident.

We still collect given cultural texts, performances and sequences as puzzles to unravel. I have and do. Though today, knowing the Saami "texts," I find myself watching *how Saami* (not me) try to "unpuzzle" the unexpected and the strange that descend upon them. This means, incidentally, that "event research" is not an easy option, offering short cuts and quick fixes; to the contrary, it is, when at its best, predicated on understandings slowly put together through "ordinary" fieldwork in, relatively-speaking, non-crisis or pre-puzzle situations.

Something of the change this addition brings to anthropological praxis can be seen in relation to ritual, whose performances have long provided anthropologists with a "window" opening onto cultural meaning. Now in ritual, "a moment of time is selected, stopped, remarked upon" (Myerhoff, 1977: 200): that is, the culture-bearers choose to stop time for a time. But what of the unexpected event? Here the event itself stops time, and people have no choice – they have not just to "remark" on it but to "unpuzzle" it.

The hunger-strikers presented – to both Norwegians and Saami – a puzzle, and proceeded to "unpuzzle" it for them. So there is the force of *inventiveness* and, once again, the contrast with ritual. This is so on two accounts.

One: In all ritual the issue of representativeness is explicit. But invention and representativeness exclude each other. Thus at the time of the hunger-strike, many a Saami villager registered not only anxiety – "do they know what they're doing?" – but indignation too: "by what right are these six people representing us all?"

Two: As performance, ritual is repeatable... indeed, ritual *shall* be repeated; not so with the performances of the kind that I am targeting. *Their* efficacy largely depends on an unbidden and unheralded intrusion on public space and time whereas for ritual, time and space are set aside; again, ritual time is not part of everyday time whereas the hunger-strikers deliberately intruded on the everyday world. And further to this point: everything depends on "the performers" eliciting spontaneous reaction from the crowd that gathers, and on the eye of the media to scoop it up and thus help "the event to spell its name" (Dayan and Katz, 1981: 12).

However, these same considerations point to a limitation. Their very inventiveness puts a limit on the currency of such performed events as a repeatable political weapon.

4. ISRAEL AND "MESSIANIC" DENOTATIONS OF EVENTS

Since 1982, my attention has turned increasingly to Israel, and to the place of messianism in culture and politics. There has been no shortage of events! I was soon struck, though, by the different twist given to them from what I was used to with the Saami. Before saying more about what I mean by that, let me briefly present two events.

Event #1

In May 1982, a military burial was carried out in the Judean desert for the remains of 25 skeletons believed to be those of warriors from a second century revolt against the Roman occupier of Palestine (Paine, 1983). The revolt had been led by a man named Bar Kochba. Even though the episode ended ignominiously for the Jews and at an enormous cost of life, Bar Kochba has been heroically mythologized in certain Zionist circles.

The President, the Prime Minister (Menachem Begin), most of the cabinet, the chief rabbis and assorted officials were flown to the site by a fleet of helicopters. In the on-site speeches, the Chief Rabbi of the armed forces berated the "evil" Romans as though they were still around; Prime Minister Begin reminded the gathered dignitaries that it was the emperor Hadrian who renamed Judea Palestine

– "a name that still haunts us" – and he linked the revolt of eighteen hundred years ago with the emergence of the State of Israel today.

Event #2

In 1985, nineteen children and three adults were killed in a collision between a train and a school bus at a level-crossing (Paine, 1992b). The nation was in grief, and to the grief was added the outrage of many Israelis over this statement by the Minister of the Interior, an Ultra-orthodox rabbi:

> It has to be understood that nothing accidental happens to Jewish people. This is a fundamental tenet of Judaism (*Jerusalem Post*, June 28, 1985).

Let us now take a closer look at these two events in conjunction. The ultra-Orthodox view holds that there is no history left; that all is a playing out of what has already been determined and may be found in the Torah (the Pentateuch); and that history is metahistory (Paine, 1989a; 1992c). Secular Zionists, on the other hand, may wish to uncover and display history, and use it to foster the "national spirit, "but that will be to no avail if Jews are not conducting their lives in accordance with the precepts of the Torah. Accordingly, the mythologizing of Bar Kochba was totally uninteresting to the Ultra-Orthodox. However, there was also some secular dissent regarding that commemorative burial. For example, notably absent from the occasion were the archaeologists (including Yigael Yadin) who had found the bones. For them, it was by no means clear that the bones were *Jewish* bones. In other words, precisely because there *is* history, let it be "true" as possible.

Returning to the fatal road accident, the concern of the rabbi was with necessary (as opposed to sufficient) cause. He may have recognized that the carelessness of the bus-driver, for example, was instrumental in what happened at the level-crossing, but it would have been God who made the driver careless. The question remains a "why" one: why did God make the bus-driver careless? And the rabbi had an answer: it was on account of sabbath defamation and because doors at the children's school lacked the encased parchment scrolls from the Torah that should be affixed to doorposts of rooms in a Jewish house.

The rabbi was not left unanswered. Public controversy raged. The Prime Minister of the day (Shimon Peres) was even challenged in the Knesset. Religious Jews who combine their orthodoxy with Zionism showed concern lest such a fundamentalist interpretation of Judaism would alienate Jews from their religious heritage. From secular-humanistic circles came the *blunt* rejection of any notion of Jewish culture being tied to divine will:

> Jews existed before their religion. Christianity began as an ideology .... Jews preceded their ideology (*Jerusalem Post*, July 24, 1985).

As for nothing accidental happening to Jews:

> Jews are no longer content to sit back and take what destiny dishes out (*ibid.*).

In order to push the whole matter a little further, I ask: Is not the understanding that we call knowledge, as opposed, perhaps, to understanding that comes with faith, comparative by nature? We understand "X" by virtue of the fact that there is a "Y" and a "Z." What, then, of these two Israeli events in the light of, for instance, the Saami material?

Let us begin with the notion of "invention." The Saami hunger-strike was an invention, hence its force of surprise. In the case of the two Israeli events however, I think we should view the matter the other way around. *Invention precedes them.* In the case of Event #1, it is the invention of the State of Israel; in the case of Event #2, it is the invention of Judaism. I believe this is more than just a nice academic point. I am suggesting that there is a great deal of sub-conscious and conscious awareness among Orthodox Jews and Jews as Israelis of the burden (one may well call it) of being invented. This being so, events in Israel incline towards being presented as *fulfillments* (Paine, 1983), fulfilling divine justice or fulfilling Jewish history.

There are several points to be mentioned about the notion of "fulfilling." First, the events themselves are way-stations on the road to the particular final *fulfilment* (as pre-figured in the acts of invention). Therefore each event should be an occasion for individuals to re-double their efforts for the attainment of that goal.

Here, too, "culture" is always "in the making." For the Ultra-Orthodox (appalled with much that happens in the Zionist state), it is a matter of "rebecoming" (Schechner, 1981) or of restoring behaviour. For a Zionist such.as David Ben-Gurion, it was a matter of making a "new Jew."

Ben-Gurion, incidentally, secular though he was, spoke often of "messianic vision" (Paine, 1989a; 1992c).

It is, then, a matter not of *a* Jewish or *an* Israeli culture but of culture*s* with radical differences between them. Our two events suggest something of the depth of the metaphysical and ideological cleft. However, – and I think this is a worthwhile paradox – no matter on which side of the cleft one is, "Israel" today, that invented entity, has a singularly *un*modern trait amidst much modernity: a *founding* trait of unmodernity, one may well say.

The case of the Ultra-Orthodox speaks for itself: all that happens is fulfilment of God's will; all happenings are events but, in a markedly "not-our-world" way, the meaning of any event is predetermined.

The Zionist case is the interesting one. Space is *shrunk*. In Harald Innis's terms (Innis, 1951) it is "discontinuous": Zionists come, as latter-day pilgrims, from Marrakesh, Moscow, or Melbourne to converge on the eschatologically or historically (depending on the meaning they give to Zionism) "high quality" space of a postage stamp, where they stay. Time is *stretched* ("continuous"): the first to travel thence was Abram, to become Abraham (Genesis, XVII: 5).

And to put irony onto the paradox: the Saami, tucked away in a Levi-Straussian (as well as a climatically) "cold" corner of the world and so easily pictured as "traditional" – as unmodern – appear, at least in the snapshot that I offered, to be "modern" players.

Now, to direct attention back to ways our world is risk-prone, along with something of the attendant cultural and social complications, I want to present, briefly enough, two more case- histories.

5. THE SAAMI AND CHERNOBYL

For the Saami, thousands of miles from the site, the explosion of the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl, April 1986, was simply a happening: but the translation into an event, with complex meanings attached to it, commenced three days later as radioactive rainfall descended on reindeer pastures, fresh-water lakes, and wilderness berry grounds of the South Saami in central Scandinavia. (The northern reaches of Scandinavia where the majority of the pastoral Saami are located, were much less affected.)

A catastrophe of terrifying potentialities beyond even what did happen, it jerks us into remembering how "the natural world has become in large part a 'created environment'... of humanly structured systems [with] high-consequence risks" (Giddens, 1991: 144). For the social sciences, the core problem is how people respond to the physical event, and then, how their responses become part of, and add complexity to, the event.

On my two visits to the area, in March of 1987 and June of 1988 (Paine, 1987; 1989b, 1992d), I found a wide and varying register of responses. People sometimes showed bewilderment at their present predicament, though more often expressed a tenacious individualism (buttressed by humdrum routines); they responded with cynicism at what had happened, but also with defiant optimism. Most importantly, I learned that when "Chernobyl" struck and for a while thereafter, the Saami spoke abundantly of "the catastrophe" that had overtaken them, until they began to realize that in doing so they added to their plight, both morally and psychically. Furthermore, while they knew that they needed "the scientists'" know-how, they realized that they must not surrender to it, that they must not allow their own knowledge and understanding of animals and pastures to be delegitimated.

I wrote in my journal how the invisibility of "Chernobyl" plagued these Saami. "If only it left an algae behind ... " said one housewife. (The scientists, of course, *do* see an "algae" left behind.) This kind of remark led me to ask myself: What *do* the Saami "see"?

I was told that in the first months of dismay and disbelief there seemed little else one could do but to listen to what experts said – even though they sometimes appeared to contradict each other – and to follow instructions (such as they were): " ... if we were to believe anything, then we had to believe them. We ourselves had no qualifications." But after a while the pastoralists began to reassert their own understanding of what "we do." And they would say, "We *must* do. We must be active, not passive." I suggest that they began to "see" through "doing."

The advice and instructions of experts began to be filtered through "our" knowledge; the

experts were subjected to "our" corrections. "We" began to rearrange arrangements (often quite simple) suggested by experts, thereby exhibiting (to "ourselves") knowledge beyond that of the experts and reestablishing "ourselves" as practitioners. Certainly, it was clear to all that things could not be pat right without the experts, but equally, even as one accepted what the experts advised (though not always), they had to be found "wrong" – or at the very least, wanting – in some detail.

There was also a problem between the southern and the northern Saami. In the politics of immediate post-Chernobyl decisions – concerning, above all, the level of toxic contamination that constitutes a health hazard (Paine, 1992d: 267) – South Saami families felt their own best interests overrun by state decisions in favour of the North Saami majority. "Chernobyl" had dealt different "hands" to the north and south, thus further fracturing the pan-Saami ethnic community which is always under strain due to the demographic and linguistic minority standing of the South Saami.

An essential part of the task for each family, then, became making "Saami culture" more visible to themselves and on their own terms:

> Chernobyl made the pure impure. It is our purity, their contamination. ... It made us think what we might lose and what, these days, we still have to lose (drawn from my fieldnotes).

Thus the post-Chernobyl period saw a flurry of re-energizing, practical cultural activities (with their share of cultural rhetoric): a theatre group played to school children in the South Saami language, using Chernobyl as the occasion to retell and reevaluate traditional Saami stories and myths; there was renewed emphasis ("lest we lose these things") on Saami handicrafts, Saami field craft, and Saami food. In sum, people acted in the knowledge that only a visible culture could possibly prevail over the invisible threat to it.

However, there are grave dangers in doing this. Heading for "tradition" in the face of crisis, especially in today's world, may not be such a good idea. The danger became (and remains today) terribly real for them in respect to Saami food: reindeer meat, berries, and lake fish – all highly polluted yet highly valued as markers of their "culture." The choice is this: health to the prejudice of "culture" or "culture" to the prejudice of health. Some families have opted for the latter.[3]

Notice, too, the contrast here with the inventiveness of the hunger-strikers. Living amidst the scourge of radiation, inventiveness has become of an inverted kind: re-enacting life's values as they were *before* the scourge, re-discovery, not invention, is taking place (Winch, 1958; Todorov, 1984). Then there is the irony of the difference between the perspective the people have of themselves and the one the ethnographer (another "expert" from outside) has of them. They are perspectives on the "re-making" of culture. For once, these Saami, characteristically adaptive people, resist change out of fear of it: in their hour of crisis, they profess to "know" their "culture" and strive to keep it, to "re-make" it as it was (Schechner, 1981). It is the anthropologist who, through the eyeglass of that crisis, now sees these Saami "re-making" their culture as different from before.

One brief general point: the distinction between natural and man-made disasters often made in disaster literature does not take us very far. Sociologically, at any rate, it is the human agency, present in both cases, of repairing the disaster that should keep our attention. Additionally, there is the following corollary: the contrast between the hunger-strike as a volitional and scripted happening and the happenstance radioactivization of a Saami landscape should not predetermine our analyses, rather, the responses to Chernobyl were as volitional and generative of meaning (if of a very different kind) as ever it was the case with the hunger-strike.

6. NEWFOUNDLAND'S "CHERNOBYL"

The return to home shores – and its challenge.

"In Cod We Trust" (Lamson, 1979: 80-81): that was the rallying-cry of a crusade some years back.[4] Today, that "trust in cod" has been overtaken by a disaster of "biblical proportions."[5] I refer, of course, to the depletion and even disappearance of the northern cod stocks.[6] Especially unnerving are not only the unprecedented scale of this "Chernobyl" but its uncharted consequences as well. (In that, it is surely *not* biblical.) It is another alarming case of "high-consequence risks" attendant upon a "created environment" (Giddens, 1991: 144) which the oceans, through their high-tech exploitation, have become.

Sociologically, what is particularly distressing is the way in which in the city (St. John's) is all so much at one remove (or deceptively, is seemingly so). Fishing villages lose their *raison d'être* but the everyday of the city continues as before. The tragedy is not quite as far away as Biafra, but it sometimes seems so. This situation uncovers an unexpected or, at least, a relatively unremarked side to electronic modernity's collapsing of space and time: the cliché is that there is no longer any centre and hence no periphery, but we are also finding (to adapt a notion from Gertrude Stein) that "near" is no longer always there.

What of life in the once-active fishing villages? Unlike the Saami "Chernobyl," here the blight *is* visible to the in-shore fishermen. They draw their own conclusions from their observations over the years: conclusions that so often leave them sceptical over the "science" of fisheries science, and cynical over the ways of the (ir)responsible politicians. Meanwhile, there is, for them, the everyday economics of their situation. Fishermen and -women face off, resourcefully and with guile, the bureaucrat and his regulations over "benefits."

But here I am painting in broad strokes (with much suppositional "paint"). The research has still to be done. While the indispensable brief of our natural scientists is to figure out what is happening in the ocean (Gomes, 1993), ours should be the meanings afflicted village populations give to the catastrophe that has overtaken them. And it will be a matter of *changing meanings*, inevitably. Without that understanding, official efforts to "help," to alleviate the distress and to plan for a convincing future may well go astray – raising new problems in their turn.

I stress changing meanings for we already know enough to say with certainty that there is not one catastrophe but an unfolding series as the emptiness of the ocean begins to corrode the self-respect of men and women, to corrode relations between neighbours, between kin, and yes, between fisher and non fisher, between bay and town. The corrosion comes from the insidiously pervasive condition of "being without." We need to begin to understand what "being without" means by the hour, day, week, month, and year for individuals and their families, for their communities and beyond.

At present, that is the most important thing. However, in learning about "being without" we will hear about imagined conditions of "having again" and of "re-making" (Schechner, 1981). We should also pay attention, while in the field, to the calculus local people give to the academy's notion of "sustainability,"[7] and we should work to have *their* criteria of sustainability heard.

7. CONCLUSIONS

I have wanted to show how *events*, time and again, point me in the directions my research should take. An underlying theoretical point is how "event anthropology" throws into question any assumptions that might still linger among us about *axiomatic* group solidarity. One might expect as much among "the Saami." Yet the placing of a tent in Oslo and the different "hands" Chernobyl dealt to the North and South Saami, broke it. It is the same with "the Newfoundlanders": the fishery crisis with its consequential "being without" for those of "the bay" exacerbated already-existing fissures between "townies" (city dwellers) and "baymen/baywops" (inhabitants of rural, outport communities). Cultural glue can become unstuck; make-belief, under strain, reveals its illusionary character.

I have also wanted to make the point that it is by attending to events that we best address our contemporary condition of radical (rather than post-) modernity (Giddens, 1990, 1991). Even "small" and everyday happenings such as a tragic traffic accident may become events of considerable consequence. Another point I would stress is that it is not simply that there are *more* events (with the collapsing of time and space) but that more of them are *under*-understood. This state of affairs contributes to *risk* as a characteristic of our contemporary condition. Again, it is not that there is more risk (a doubtful proposition) but rather that risk impinges upon us in quite different ways than earlier.

On the one hand, risks emerge from happenings remote from the agency of the ordinary person but impose directly on her or his life chances. Yet since it is the very presence of uncertain knowledge – knowledge whose limits have not yet been tapped – that fuels the exploratory energies of science, we, it is argued (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992), live deliberately with risk. On the other

hand, risk, to an incomparably greater degree than earlier, is now a consequence of social arrangements of which we have been our own determining agent. This does not mean that universal consequences necessarily follow: account must be taken of how the meaning of living with risk – the very perception of risk and how that is politicized – varies (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Douglas, 1986).[8]

The two Saami cases brought to light a similar difference respecting the ontology of *powerlessness* (and its risks): in the one case there was deliberate artifice and in the other ghastly happenstance.

Another point that I would press is the importance of following the *life-histories* of events. The dam was eventually built, but the event of the hunger-strike put Saami-Norwegian relations on a wholly new footing so that today there is a Norwegian Saami parliament (Thuen, 1995). The task now is to watch what happens around an institutionalized forum created to express a collective will where there was no sense (or but a very diffuse sense) of a collective will before. In short, we must bear witness to the unfolding life-history of a cultural innovation/invention: the Saami parliament.

The same applies to the plight of the "Chernobyl"-afflicted Saami. What I have sketched here from fieldwork soon after the catastrophe does not predicate future developments. In particular, their "re-making" of their culture portends to be a highly politicized symbolic issue. It is likewise with Newfoundland's "Chernobyl."

All that I have said points to *participant-observation*. A motherhood issue among anthropologists, it nevertheless needs to be defended and championed as never before in the SSHRC-favoured research environment of mega-projects (billed as interdisciplinary but in practice so often simply multi- disciplinary). We should choose our argument carefully. We know that as a research method, participant-observation aims to capture the subjective (sorely lacking as that dimension is in other disciplines' research *modus operandi*), but there is the tendency abroad to discredit such an approach as too "soft," as too "impressionistic." Our case may be better argued, I suggest, as a methodology that allows one to view, and explain, the mutual and changing interpenetrations of the global and the local.

It is also in this broad context that we should be given to *keeping* the "squishy" character of the anthropological chocolate over which, you will remember, Peter-the-historian demurred. Nor should we deplore the "muddles in the model" of "culture" and what I playfully referred to above as our "post-modern mess." As of yore, anthropology's task is still to explain (re-present/ translate/ interpret) the unfamiliar and to problematize the apparently familiar. Today's world, however, especially calls to this task the conceptual indeterminacy and boundary-hopping such as the "squishy" and the "post-modern mess" suggest!

Notes

1. Distinguished Lecture delivered to the Faculty of Memorial University of Newfoundland, April 27 1994. My thanks go out to Lisa Gilad and Gordon Inglis for their helpful readings of its penultimate draft. For publication with a readership different from the lecture audience, some deletions, additions and adaptations have been made.

2. The St. John's Regatta is believed to be the oldest continuing sporting event in North America, dating from the early nineteenth century. Regatta Day is a provincial holiday and the city is traffic-jammed. It is a populist Henley: the Lieutenant Governor and other frock-coated dignitaries lend their presence, but the event belongs to the citizenry – they are there *en masse* and between the races try their luck at the many booths at the water's edge.

3. For a better understanding of that, see Rappaport, 1971 on the notion of "sanctity."

4. In the late 1970s Newfoundland writers, artists, and actors counter-protested the Greenpeace protest over the Newfoundland seal hunt. "Codpeace" was born. Much of the rhetorical song-lines and slogans, as well as the orchestration of the protest in St. John's (reaching as far as Washington D.C.), were Miller Ayre's, a leading St. John's (and Canadian) business man, currently Publisher of The Evening Telegram. The Mummers theatre troupe also toured Canada with "They Club Seals, Don't They?" (Brookes, 1988).

5. Richard Cashin: one-time Liberal Member of Parliament; founding (and long serving) President of the "Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers" (FFAW) union; chair of a federal Task Force concerned with likely implications and consequences of the fisheries' crisis.

6. In 1992, a two-year moratorium was declared on the commercial fishing of the northern cod, the staple of much of Newfoundland fisheries. The mora-

torium is still in place and now includes all cod stocks around Newfoundland together with some other groundfish species, and embraces subsistence fishing for home consumption. The moratorium also extends to the Atlantic Provinces and to the Gulf Shore of Quebec. In Newfoundland alone, it means that up to thirty thousand persons – fishers and fishplant workers; women and men – in scores of communities have their livelihood in abeyance.

7. The concept of "sustainability" was, of course, launched into the public arena a few years ago by Gro Harlem Brundland (Brundtland, 1987), the Norwegian Prime Minister. It has since entered the vocabulary of the politically correct, and I venture a word of caution here. Participating in a "Sustainability" conference (MAB, 1993) in Norway, I found the notion dangerously mired: not only in the politics and capitalist paradigms of the sustainable goals, such as one expects, but also in the researchers' own normative standards of sustainability. (Consider in this context my remarks about expert-practitioner interaction above.)

8. Paine, 1995b offers a fuller exposition of the issues of this paragraph.

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