Science, Erudition and Relevant Connections

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Paulo Sousa makes a strong case for applying the best anthropological models of cultural transmission (epidemiological models) to anthropology itself, to the ways in which anthropologists’ choices of topics and methods have changed. Sousa’s model of how kinship got gradually pushed away from its central position in anthropological inquiry is quite persuasive. Here I only propose a slight modification of this general model, in the hope of making some of its predictions more specific.

As Sousa points out, scientists’ general statements about their own field generally consist of interpretative statements that cannot be taken as a straightforward expression of what they actually do. Also, most scientists and academics are generally unaware of (or unconcerned with) the dynamics of authority transmission that organise their own field, that is, the set of criteria that people actually use when deciding that a given person is a member of a professional guild or community.

Authority transmission is important because it has crucial consequences for how fields evolve. Scientific or more generally academic and scholarly activity is a highly regulated social activity. Each specific community (generally co-extensive with what is called a “field”) has shared criteria for who is allowed to join and what counts as a valid contribution. In the same way as a guild, members of a “field” protect their common interest (the reputation of their activity) by restricting entry to those who fulfil certain conditions. In the case at hand, this means the set of criteria used to decide that this or that graduate students have become anthropologists. With a little idealisation, this amounts to: How does the community of

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anthropologists actually decide that this person could be considered for a job as an anthropologist, or decide that their publications count as contributions to anthropology?

In terms of such criteria, it seems to me that the opposition between “scientific” and “non-scientific” modes, or perhaps “humanities” vs. “science” are too simple, and that there are three clearly distinct ideal types here. I call them ideal-types because I do not want to suggest that any discipline or field is organised exclusively around one of these possible modes of transmission, although in many fields one of them is clearly dominant. I will call these three modes science, erudition and relevant-connections respectively. In what follows I will try briefly to describe these three modes before returning to the specific case of kinship and anthropology.

**The Scientific Mode**

The ‘scientific’ mode should not take too long to describe. This is not because scientific authority and authoritativeness are simple matters, far from it. Philosophy of science is difficult precisely because it is not easy to explain what this particular mode of transmission consists of, what really makes it different from (and vastly more successful than) all other ways of gathering knowledge. This however does not matter for our purpose, because the scientific mode, if difficult to explain, is very easy to recognise. You know it when you see it. Here is a short list of the common “symptoms” by which we recognise a field organised by this particular mode of transmission:

1. There is an agreed corpus of knowledge. What has been achieved so far is taken as achieved by most practitioners. The common corpus also includes a set of recognised methods, and most important for my purpose here, a list of outstanding questions and puzzles to solve. People also tend to agree on which of these questions are important and which only require some puzzle-solving and some tidying up of the theoretical landscape.
2. The fundamentals of the discipline and its results are explained in textbooks and manuals that are all extraordinarily similar, as the essential points and the way to get there are agreed in the discipline.
3. It does not really matter who said what or when. Indeed, many practitioners have a rather hazy picture of the history of their dis-