



Introduction

Whether it admits it or not, anthropology aims to be a universal science.
—Maurice Godelier, “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall ...”

In a Nutshell

Journalists often ask writers to summarize their books in a sentence or two. Considering the broad scope of this book, I will allow myself three: Despite the incredible diversity existing among and within human cultures, there are many phenomena that occur regularly in all known societies. These commonalities, or universals, while deriving in part from human nature, may also have specific social, cultural, and systemic sources. We need to develop a working understanding of these universals so that we might advance legitimate, empirically based human science set on creating knowledge that is politically relevant to fostering real solutions to the problems that complicate human co-existence in the Age of the Anthropocene.

Universals in a World of Diversity and the “Ethnographic Dazzle”

Human universals (hereafter referred as simply “universals”) should not be understood as the counterpart to diversity in human societies. Throughout the twentieth century and up to (though somewhat less) today, the emphasis has been on difference. Our respect for pluralism, our celebration of difference, and our concern for identity politics are all hallmarks of a progressive, modern democracy (Malik 2014). In an increasingly globalized world of melding and interacting cultures, the need to respect difference is of course fully legitimate. From the viewpoint of an anthropologist, the strength of ethnography lies in showing the richness and variations of cultures. Universals become truly interesting when we see them as a pattern set in the context of the diversity of human existence in biocultural terms (see Sobo 2013 for an overview). Godelier’s observation that anthropology is universal is to be understood in

two ways: one, it is a science; and two, no society is excluded from analysis, since anthropology aims to discover phenomena and mechanisms present in all societies (Godelier 1994: 97). Anthropology can help reduce the problem of focusing on Western, educated, industrial, rich, democratic (i.e., *WEIRD*) people, a severe problem that has pervaded fields such as psychology and economic research all along (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010; Norenzayan 2013: 52–54, 166–68).

Research on universals offers an especially dynamic and useful tool for understanding our so-called human nature. It enables us to find a middle ground between speculative approaches and wishful thinking, on the one hand, and the nontheoretical collecting and sorting of assumed similarities, on the other. What interests me is finding a nonmetaphysical approach to the question of what is human. “The grand theory of universals is that in combination they constitute building blocks or armature of the human condition; subsets of them are equally building blocks and armature of human nature” (D. Brown 2013: 411). My basic credo here is that what is human is not simply a matter of nature or of culture, and that culture, or the definition of culture, cannot be limited to an intellectual or mental construct but must also be based on an inherent social component. This book is meant to contribute to an anthropology that identifies the smallest common working denominator in the dialogue between all the fields that explore or study human beings. Anthropology is here formulated as the “question concerning the possibilities within being human, and the limitations of the humanly possible” (Hauschild 2005: 61). Thus conceived, research into universals can contribute to an all-encompassing human science, and yet more fully to an empirically based but theory-driven anthropology understood as the science or the study of the human being in his or her entirety.

My belief is that our fascination with the complexity of cultural variants has overshadowed our ability to see the commonalities between cultures. I speak from my own experience. I am interested in exploring human universals, but at the same time am impressed as always by the diversity and complexity among and between individuals within the kaleidoscope of human cultures. This book calls on scholars to be more explicit in our images of human beings, to create these images based on empirical research and to employ the approaches used in the many fields of study that explore universals. This does not mean simply casting ourselves or other human beings or cultures in the role of what could be the general or average type among us. My point here is rather that the social sciences and humanities of today have become too focused on the specific particularities of individual cultures or subcultures. Cultural differences, which are often easy to establish, tend to blind us to less obvious similarities. Fox (2014: 7, 17, 176) properly described our fascination with differences as “ethnographic dazzle.” Those who maintain an ultra-

relativistic focus on cultural differences distance themselves all too easily from the universals that do in fact exist for all human cultures.

Universals, Humanism, and Anthropology

Scientists carry out research on certain phenomena not only for the sake of knowledge, but also with much broader intellectual interests in mind. They are motivated to explore nonscientific impulses as well, which could eventually lead them to draw certain problematic conclusions—and the topic of universals is already filled with such conclusions. Upon finding likenesses or common features among cultures, we might then purposely extrapolate further commonalities out of these original likenesses (Welsch 2006: 122; 2012). Herein lies the danger of hoping we see certain universals without taking the time to prove their existence. For political purposes, the notion of humanity as a cosmopolitan community can be an enticing concept. An example of this involves the current interest in German politics for development strategies invoking the belief of “one world,” an idea that proves effective as a base of action grounded in humanistic ethics and global responsibility. In light of the concern about cultural fragmentation and the problem of rapid globalization, the search for universals in constructing arguments against xenophobia and racism is perfectly understandable. In a globally changing ideological climate dominated by individualism and competition, critics of globalization are often driven by a strong desire to prove that contrary norms or motives are in fact universal. Accordingly, what we end up hoping to find in the search for universals are the human attitudes or characteristics deemed more positive for people and for cultures, such as sociality or altruism.

Cultural anthropology became a field of study in the mid-nineteenth century. In the scientific-historical perspective, the field is rooted in the Enlightenment and the essential question of a nontheological explanation for the diversity found in cultures. Cultural anthropology today also focuses on the complexity of human cultures. As always, work in cultural anthropology concentrates primarily on the unique characteristics of cultures and cultural diversity. In view of the wide speculation on universals found today in many fields of study and in the popular media, cultural anthropology is able to offer a critical and empirical perspective on the topic and examine assumptions made about universals by researchers schooled in methods of cross-cultural comparison.

In the German-speaking world from the nineteenth century up to World War II, certain prominent figures in cultural anthropology, such as Adolf Bastian (1881, 1895; also see Chevron 2004) and Wilhelm E. Mühlmann (e.g.,

1962, 1966), were dedicated to the study of universals. Today only a few anthropologists deal with universals in their work. They include Andreas Bruck, Thomas Hauschild, Hans-Jürgen Hildebrandt, Jürgen Jensen, Klaus E. Müller, Joachim W. Raum, Wolfgang Rudolph, Justin Stagl, and Peter Tschohl. The few more current studies on the topic touch upon universals in large part as a critique on the extreme forms of cultural relativism. I know of only one large cultural anthropology research project concerning universals in continental Europe: an Austrian project entitled “Human Universals and Cultural History,” directed by Karl R. Wernhart and Marie-France Chevron (Chevron and Wernhart 2000–2001; Chevron 2004: esp. 398–422).

The characterizing aspects of classical anthropology are a focus on cultural specifics and a methodological approach based on case studies, with an essentializing of differences. The focus not only characterizes cultural anthropology in the German-speaking world; it also shapes the image of the field worldwide, a fact complicating a broadly based study like the one presented here. Ethnographers have often demonstrated an interest in universals and cultural comparison, which is well suited for the pursuit of identifying universals and has always been a pillar of the discipline. In day-to-day operations, though, researchers in the field concentrate on particularized research questions that are examined according to a “microscopic” methodological approach. The particularized view includes—though some do not freely admit to it—the search for general patterns as well, since anthropologists are primarily interested in patterns and regularities, even at the level of individual societies (K. Fox 2014: 9–10). The descriptions of specific cultures are implicitly comparative, indirectly addressing universals in that they explain the ways of life of certain “other” (foreign) cultures to the members of another, mostly Western, culture (Peacock 2001: 96).

The focus on particulars and on cultural differences shapes how the field is perceived in general. The media and popular culture portray cultural anthropology as chiefly concerned with the foreign, the strange and the exotic (Antweiler 2005a: 46–52; Schönhuth 2005: 83–88). This is also how other cultural and social sciences perceive the field. Business, the media, and politics borrow theories and research from cultural anthropology but do so almost exclusively to emphasize differences among cultures. This perception results from the general acceptance of cultures as representing separate entities or clearly delimited ‘containers.’ Although differences are not the entire focus of the cultural sciences, they are at present the leading global ‘currency’ in the thinking on culture. Fearing the homogenizing power of global society and the steady disappearance of cultural diversity, academics, politicians, and media personalities have directed their searching gaze toward boundaries and differences within cultures. The now prevalent term ‘intercultural,’ with its implicit assumption of a relationship between clearly separate units, signals the

re-emergence of problematic thinking that sees cultures as separate spheres, units, or containers. This way of thinking has been partially overcome in cultural studies, but only partially, as these fields also thrive on presenting extreme points of view (for a critical response, see van der Walt 2006; Welsch 2006: 123, 2012; but also see Griese 2008, 2014).

Universals and Interdisciplinary Cooperation

Interdisciplinary work is not a mere hopeful stab at universality but rather a platform based on pure necessity. Anthropology alone cannot sufficiently tackle the topic of universals. Case in point: to address the topic, I needed to explore various fields of scientific study and ways of thinking, an undertaking that of course takes some time. I also needed to acquaint myself with older and even remote published sources. Apart from my other ongoing projects, preparation of this book took ten years. I turned to contributions from the humanities, the cultural and social sciences, and the natural sciences—hence the long reference section included at the end of this book. For me, many of the more important or inspiring authors are not cultural anthropologists. These include Scott Atran (psychology), Pascal Boyer (philosophy of religion), Wolfgang Welsch (philosophy), Carl Degler and Jörn Rüsen (history), Ellen Dissanayake (prehistory), Elmar Holenstein (linguistics, philosophy), Bruno Latour (sociology), Peter J. Richerson (ecology) and Frans de Waal (primatology). Considering the scope of the topic, I found it difficult not to end up feeling like somewhat of a dabbler. I was trained as a cultural anthropologist, but I also have a background in natural history. Based on my own experience, and with respect to a broad spectrum of disciplines, I chose to focus on knowledge and findings from the social and cultural sciences, as well as on diverse approaches originating from those human sciences inspired by the work of Charles Darwin.

Goals and Limitations

I assume that universals cannot simply be deciphered by way of some kind of public opinion poll of the world's peoples (Geertz 1965: 102). My work here is a general synthesis of empirical data drawn from within a consistent theoretical framework. With this book, I want to provide a systematic overview of the topic of cultural universals. Apart from work coming out of the field of linguistics, very few monographs are available on the topic. Relevant here is a book by the anthropologist Donald Edward Brown, the most recent monograph on the subject (D. Brown 1991; see Lehmann 1994). Internationally a few collected

volumes have appeared, while in the German-speaking world, a few papers and the edited volumes of Neil Roughley (2000), Peter Hejl (2001) and Beat Sitter-Liver (2009) represent the sum of the work dedicated to the topic.

I believe that cultural anthropology can offer a special contribution to the topic through its essentially cautious approach to universals. Having been schooled in cultural relativism, anthropologists have a fundamentally contextualist and comparative perspective. They will almost always regard universal claims with a skeptical eye. In a book on universals, this approach helps me keep a critical distance from any hastily formed postulates on universals. I am bringing universality and diversity together instead of playing them off each other. For this purpose, I am using, among other materials, the results of research on universals that was carried out in the field of linguistics in the 1960s and only marginally appreciated in cultural anthropology and the other cultural sciences at that time. A rather radical but discussion-worthy argument arising from this research claims that differences within societies and diversity between societies are in type, degree, function, and effect the same (Holenstein 1998d: 326; Cappai 2007: 96). The intracultural complexity within a culture is therefore analogous to the intercultural variability within humanity (Holenstein 2013). With this in mind, the research into universals will make a contribution to the question of the boundaries between cultures and to models concerning cultural diversity (Antweiler 2012c).

With regard to cultural studies and especially anthropology, I would like to rehabilitate research into universals. Universals are both constraining and generative (D. Brown 2013: 411). With this in mind, the work presented here should do three things. First, it should complement and update Brown's monograph and his systematic presentation. Furthermore, my discussion on the factors that cause universals should amend Brown's slant toward evolutionary psychology by pointing out other possible causes of pancultural phenomena or patterns. For these purposes I turn to German and English sources and, to a lesser extent, older works and some contributions from the French-speaking world. Second, it addresses the criticism of research into universals. Fundamental criticism, or rather the critical stances that deny the existence of universals, claim they are trivial, or assume they would be constructed merely by equalization will all be part of the discussion that follows. Authors who strictly reject generalized science and especially any talk of human nature will be considered as well. These critical voices have arisen from a postmodern, post-structuralist or postcolonialist worldview. And third, this book summarizes the new and unfortunately far-flung results of research into universals since the 1990s.

Even a broad approach faces certain limitations. I decided to refrain from outlining the complicated trajectories in the historical development of scientific interest in universals within the Western history of ideas (on this Ant-

weiler 2012a: ch. 3 and 4; 2012b: ch. 2). This decision means the book does not discuss universal concepts within great non-Western traditions like those of Confucius, Mencius, Lao-tse, Chuang-tse, or the Vedas, Upanishads, and Shankar. In these traditions it is common to find universal ideas presented logically, tied to economic notions and framed within political concepts (Julien 2014). The history of universal thinking is an important yet complicated research topic, as it involves many scientific disciplines and philosophical schools of thought. To explore the topic fully would require another book. The book in your hands follows a systematic approach. I am not only interested in posing difficult questions and issues, but in answering them as well:

- How do we understand the sentence “All cultures are alike” without facing logical and empirical inconsistencies?
- How do we identify universals more precisely without falling (even unintentionally) into the Eurocentric or ethnocentric trap?
- Which universals can be postulated without producing trivial similarities?
- How do pancultural patterns become empirically established, and which of the postulated universals bear up to empirical evidence?
- How do we explain universals? Of all possible explanations available, which tend to be contradictory or complementary of each other?
- Why do some phenomena, such as vegetarianism, polygamy, or public sexual intercourse, remain rare as cultural behavior while others, such as food taboos and animal sacrifice, are surprisingly common?
- What is the relationship between universality and cultural diversity?
- Do universals have methodical value in explaining intracultural and intercultural change?
- How are universals relevant to the humanities and social sciences?
- What specific research contribution can a theoretically driven, empirical anthropology make to the many disciplines in which studying universals would be relevant?

The Intended Reader and Chapter Outline

The book addresses, first off, researchers and academics from all fields interested in developing an interdisciplinary perspective on the topic of universals. It is also intended for people involved in making decisions or setting policy in the public domain, or anyone else who would like to gain a general overview of the topic. I am interested in establishing a tie between diverse fields of study that need an understanding of universals but rely on their own separate forms of technical jargon to communicate about the topic. With a broad readership in mind, I have avoided using copious footnotes and have instead created an

extensive reference section of cited works cutting across a broad range of topics and including original works as well as general summaries.

With the historical discourse and current debates in mind, Chapter 1 discusses why the likenesses that occur between cultures are at once fascinating and controversial. Since the universal statements being made in the world today are never in short supply, there is an increased premium on developing techniques that give greater empirical confidence to claims of universality. Chapter 2 presents the key terms of the discussion on universals while demonstrating how polysemous the word “universal” is. I expand the discussion by introducing central concepts and elucidating the topic’s importance for cultural studies and social sciences. One of the main points here is that the search for commonalities in human cultures and the study of particular societies are interdependent. Chapter 3 includes, as a theoretical basis, a basic portrayal of the relationship between cultures and so-called human nature. It also describes the question of human beings’ unique status using the most current theoretical insights and empirical findings. A central point in this chapter is that universals, contrary to broadly held assumptions, are not the same as natural or inherent human attributes. Whereas human nature is reflected within every individual, universals refer to the level of cultures as collective units. Chapter 4 provides an overview of a selection of specific universals within the context of chosen topic areas. Here the importance of ethnographic reporting becomes quite clear, as do the limitations involved in verifying the existence of universals. Chapter 5 elaborates on the methodological approaches used when universals are postulated, recognized, and examined on a cross-cultural comparative level. It also discusses the possibility of culturally independent concepts and the problems that accompany the presentation of lists of universals, a classical approach to their study. Alternative ways of describing commonalities, such as involving narrative and more holistic approaches, are presented here.

Turning the general idea of universals into working propositions for empirical comparative research requires that we describe them precisely, classify them, and expand the very notion of universals. Chapter 6 clarifies the diversity in types and variants of universals, and Chapter 7 presents possibilities for explaining universals. It is made clear that there exist only a few explanations of why universals occur, and that the biological nature of human beings, though important, is only one such explanation. Chapter 8 provides an overview of moderate to fundamental criticisms of the study of universals. Moderate critics see the search for common patterns as futile or misguided and are critical of comparative approaches. These critiques most often refer to Clifford Geertz’s detracting remarks. A more vehement criticism sees the search for universals as an outcome of Eurocentrism, Western arrogance, or imperialism. The chapter demonstrates that radical critiques most often take

severe misrepresentations of twentieth-century anthropology as their point of departure. Chapter 9 summarizes the important points made throughout the discussion to show that the problem of cross-cultural similarities and a comparative approach are at the core of the anthropological enterprise. The extensive bibliography that follows mainly includes titles from English- and German-speaking academia going back to the mid-twentieth century and extending to recent research till 2016.