

“Anthropology needs to go mainstream”

An interview with Gillian Tett

Gillian Tett is known as one of the most successful and influential financial and business journalists of the English-speaking world. Her journalistic work has won numerous honours, including the British Press Awards for Columnist of the Year (2014), Journalist of the Year (2009) and Business Journalist of the Year (2008). She has also received the British Academy President’s Medal (2011), the Spear’s Year Award for Best Financial Book of the Year (2009) and the Wincott Award for economic, financial and business journalism (2007). She currently serves as US Managing Editor of the Financial Times.

At the same time, Dr Tett is one of the few public figures, who passionately make the case for the study and practice of social anthropology. She holds a PhD in the subject from the University of Cambridge and in 2014 she received the Royal Anthropological Institute’s Marsh Award for Anthropology in the World. In the following interview she outlines her vision of what the discipline can and should bring to public and private sector management. The interview can be read as a contrasting view to the notion that anthropology is primarily a form of “counter-culture” (Eriksen & Stein, forthcoming). It took place at the 2016 Hay Festival, right before Dr Tett presented her latest book, entitled “The Silo Effect” to an audience of over one thousand people.

Felix Stein: Why did you decide to study anthropology?

Gillian Tett: To be honest, I grew up as a child just hankering to have adventure and to travel the world. I have always been fascinated by other cultures and by trying to think myself into other people’s lives. I wanted to explore the world in every sense, so I decided to study Anthropology, even if my father wanted me to read accountancy or law instead. At the age of eighteen, I took a gap year between school and university to work with a medical charity in Pakistan, spending four months working in a hospital in the East of the country before moving up to the North West. During that time, I became even more fascinated by the subject, so, when

I moved to Cambridge to begin my Bachelor's degree I decided to read Archaeology and Anthropology.

FS: Why did you get a PhD in the subject?

GT: I was not particularly committed as a student and initially did not plan to do a PhD at all. As an undergraduate I already wanted to be a writer or journalist but then got very scared of trying. I also played with the idea of becoming a set designer, but after asking around at different theatres decided I could not get a job in either of these professions and applied for the PhD as a kind of last resort. Nowadays, I am happy to have done it, even if it was not an obvious choice. I got into the PhD somewhat by accident as I had messed up my finals and was only able to finance it by virtue of a scholarship programme somewhere in the system that was not reliant on me getting a first degree. My PhD supervisor was the amazing Ernest Gellner but on a day-to-day basis Caroline Humphrey was probably most involved in my work.

FS: How did you come to write about Tajikistan?

GT: That happened totally by accident again. I had spent four months in Tibet during the summer between the second and third year of my undergraduate study and wanted to go back there for the PhD. However, the Tiananmen Square demonstrations erupted and the political climate during the protests' aftermath did not allow me to return. I applied to carry out research in Xinjiang, which was impossible for the same reason, so at the very last minute I changed my field site to Tajikistan, mostly because it was opening up as a result of Glasnost and because Caroline Humphrey had contacts up there. I spoke some Urdu from my time in Pakistan, which made it easy to learn Tajik, and I learned to speak Russian by taking intensive language classes for about a year and a half.

FS: Did you ever want to become an academic?

GT: No, never for a moment. I never had a great life plan and simply began the PhD because I did not have a job and was seeking adventure. However, two main aspects really put me off academia. Firstly, by the end of my fieldwork in Tajikistan a very brutal civil war had erupted. Having witnessed some of its violence and horror, I came to doubt whether academic anthropology was really relevant. I had started work as a journalist at that time, which I enjoyed so much that I almost did not finish my PhD. So I paused my research for two years and finished it late, when I was already working as a journalist. It took all of my annual holiday and several months of working at night to finish it eventually. The second issue with academic life was that the college fellowship programmes available for postdoctoral researchers only paid a few thousand pounds a year, which was not really enough for me to live on.

FS: Is journalism more relevant than academic anthropology?

GT: Yes, journalism is often much more relevant as it allows you to address an extremely broad audience in a very immediate way. While some journalistic articles seem to vanish without having any impact at all, others have such a drastic effect that it becomes hard to tell whether journalists are just observers, or really participants in the phenomena that they describe. This was particularly obvious in my coverage of the financial crisis, where my writing could at times shift prices of financial products, affect the health of institutions and shape investor behaviour (Tett 2010: 26).

However, even as a journalist I continue to struggle with the issue of relevance more generally. In order to reach a wide range of people, journalists have to make a series of concessions, writing pieces much faster than you would expect and ensuring their commercial popularity. Thus, they do not always have time to get the entire truth or they end up

sensationalising issues, running the risk of being relevant in scope but flawed in content. So while the relevance is there, the compromises that journalists have to make are really endless.

FS: Does your training in Anthropology remain useful in your current job?

GT: Completely. Anthropology has changed my life. I am absolutely evangelical about it and I think that – and this is really my key message – the discipline is not defined by the content that anthropologists study, but by the prism and filter through which they look at the world. Anthropology teaches you a way of seeing social life which, once you have been immersed in it, never leaves your mind and changes our outlook on it very radically. It teaches you to be humbly curious and ready to question and challenge existing classification systems and cultural patterns that others may take for granted.

I would argue that there are five defining features to anthropology's method. Firstly, anthropologists look at the world bottom-up. They try to immerse themselves in them via participant observation, rather than examining social activity top-down. What they do is not armchair analysis but it is about getting your feet dirty so as to understand the micro-level patterns of social life. Secondly anthropologists try to look at how different aspects of social life hang together. They try to connect the dots between seemingly unrelated parts of people's existence, such as their personal and cultural background, and the ways in which they carry out their work. This holistic approach to the study of social life provides them with insights that narrowly focused analyses do not provide.

Thirdly, anthropologists look at the gap between what people say and what they do, with particular attention to the social silences of cultural life. Often the things people do not talk about are what matters most. One example of this were the debt and derivative markets that lay at the heart of the 2008 financial crisis (Tett 2009a, 2009b:6, 2013a:5, 2013b). These

markets were often considered too technical, boring or complex to be of any interest to non-bankers, and the resulting lack of scrutiny by politicians, the media or end consumers allowed bankers to act as they pleased. Anthropologists hold that those parts of life that are explicitly ignored by the people under study may be at least as relevant as those that people do talk about.

Fourthly, Anthropologists do a lot of comparative work because they know that thinking your way into the mind of the Other helps you look back on yourself and get a really fresh perspective on what you do. Comparison allows them to see the contradictions or ambiguities of a cultural setting that are frequently not obvious to the people involved in it. I make this point in my latest book with reference to the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Tett 2016). In studying Algeria, Bourdieu looked at “exotic” people in developing countries, which is what most Anthropologists used to do. Then, however he flipped the lens and used that experience to look back at France. This is where contemporary anthropology is heading.

Finally, for better or worse, anthropologists tend not to be very judgemental. They deal first and foremost in description rather than prescription, which means that they are frequently more careful about jumping to conclusions. That is my personal vision of Anthropology, anyways. I happen to think that all of these five traits are absolutely invaluable in the world today and need to be presented to a wider public¹.

FS: What then is the role of anthropology in wider society?

GT: I give a lot of speeches and constantly talk about the discipline. My core message is that in the same way that in the last two decades mainstream culture and business culture have woken up to the fact that a bit of psychology and cognitive science can help people become

¹ In some of her previous articles, the author has also mentioned the anthropologists’ attention to power relations as one of their main strengths (see Tett 2008, 2014)

more effective business leaders, political leaders and human beings, the next big leap is to realise that there are unnoticed cultural rules that shape our lives as profoundly as do the psychological processes in our brains. So my dream for anthropology in the next decade is to go mainstream. Economics has been drawn out of the geeky side waters over the past hundred years, turning it into a discipline that shapes how people approach the world today. Psychology and cognitive science have undergone similar developments and no one would have a discussion today of how people operate without considering their cognitive processes. Even history has gone mainstream, so anthropology can go mainstream too. It is a repository of fantastically powerful and good ideas that teach people how and why our cultural rules are part of who we are. Yet, tragically it is one of the most under-appreciated disciplines in the wider world.

I am convinced that anthropologists are currently facing a God-given moment for this to happen. Firstly, the rapid proliferation of technology, which appears to be culture free, ironically places a higher premium on understanding human behaviour and culture than ever before. Without grasping how human beings use, and respond to technology we are in danger of at best miserable and at worst blowing ourselves up. Ironically, the more this seemingly a-cultural technology spreads and speeds up changes in social behaviour, the more the cultural dynamics behind it come to matter.

Secondly, the spread of technology provides anthropology with the most incredible opportunity to make itself relevant by combining forces with big data. That is because historically there have been two ways of studying human society: Either through time consuming individualistic micro-level observation with the human eye, or via top-down analyses of vast banks of data from an armchair. For the first time in history, the rise of big data means that we can actually do both: Detailed micro-level observations of individuals,

carried out on a very large scale. However, we still need to grasp the cultural element that is part of this, so one way to re-enliven the discipline is to do digital anthropology.

Finally, as globalisation gathers force, an ever greater premium is put on people understanding how different cultures collide and interact. So, all in all, we are at kind of a breakthrough point for anthropology, comparable to previous revolutions in the discipline, such as the ascent of Darwin's evolutionary theory in the 19th century or the rise and subsequent fall of the colonial empire. These breakthrough points created a need amongst intellectual elites to examine human nature and cultural difference, which is growing again today.

FS: Isn't anthropology quite useless for the management world? After all we deal in nuance, tend to address questions that do not translate easily into policy recommendations and we generally take a long time for our analyses.

GT: Yes, anthropologists do tend to qualify everything, which is one of their most *valuable and* charming features, as is the fact that they take a long time to get their studies done. The worst that they can do, I think, is to suffer from what I call the "dirty lens phenomenon", whereby anthropologists worry about their own biases so much that they consider their work and existence to be perfectly relativistic. Thus, one of the biggest challenges for anthropologists moving into the corporate world is to make compromises. They will need to come to policy recommendations and they may need to work in shorter time frames.

FS: What do you think are the obstacles for anthropology going mainstream?

GT: Its biggest problem are the anthropologists, who are often the worst ambassadors of their own discipline. On the one hand, this is because, as Claude-Lévi Strauss had held, anthropologists are often trained to be quite self-effacing (cf. Jonhson 1997). They frequently

need to quietly and patiently watch others, so they do not tend to be the kind of people who want to take centre stage.

Secondly, since they spend a lot of their time studying how power structures work, they often have quite an anti-establishment bent, being both anti-state and anti-money. So it is for very laudable reasons that they are not very interested in marketing themselves and playing the games you have to play to do so. The problem is that this combination of traits and predisposition is disastrous if you want to lobby for a discipline in public or if you would like to use existing power networks to get financial support from the establishment. This means that anthropologists are for the most part terrible salesmen.

This may be why my own writing has come under severe criticism from some academic anthropologists. They fear that I trivialise the discipline and create stereotypes. I understand their concern, and it is true that compared to academic work my analyses are not particularly deep, which is why I call myself an amateur anthropologist these days. If I can contribute anything to the discipline, I would like to be an evangelist for it, talking about some of its most brilliant ideas and trying to make people aware of their existence. Last Tuesday, for example, I spent two hours with the governor of the US Federal Reserve, Janet Ellen, talking about US monetary policy. We addressed the fact that monetary policy was mostly about culture rather than numbers and that the economy is not actually controlled by the price of money but by narratives and the creation of cultural patterns. When I finally asked her if the Federal Reserve had ever employed an anthropologist, she replied by asking me why anyone would care about having one. I responded by talking about the brilliant work that anthropologists such as Douglas Holmes (2013) carry out in the study of corporations and even of central banks. Unfortunately, not enough people know about it.

A third factor that holds the discipline back is that UK anthropology departments are separated from other disciplines, even though there is huge overlap in terms of content. The

academic silos that are created in this way are very artificial and mostly due to institutional funding requirements. Take the case of Pierre Bourdieu once again. In spite of being a famous anthropologist, he actually did not describe himself as such and worked as professor of sociology. This is a terrible loss for anthropology as a brand, but it also shows that at the end of the day our discipline is not defined by university departments, but by having a special prism through which we look at the world. So if anthropologists can get beyond their obsession with departmental structures and celebrate their filter, i.e. their attention to implied messages, symbolism, and power structures, then that would be very powerful indeed.

FS: Is this already happening?

GT: Yes, my impression is that businesses do hire more and more anthropologists for three main reasons. They realise that consumers of separate cultural backgrounds have a habit of behaving differently from what they expect, which is why for example software companies on the US West Coast hire anthropologists, trying to get inside the minds of Chinese customers. Secondly, companies want to learn how people adapt to rapid technological change. Again, there is more and more bottom-level analysis in companies like Microsoft, Intel, and Yahoo. Even Ford Motors is hiring anthropologists to understand how the creation of self-driving cars redefines the whole concept of the automobile from a consumer perspective. Thirdly, companies want to understand how their own employees behave and increasingly realise that this takes quite a bit of bottom-up analysis. So businesses are increasingly recognising the contribution that anthropologists can make.

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