



Suomen Antropologinen Seura
The Finnish Anthropological Society

Finnish Anthropology Conference 2011

Dynamic Anthropology: Tensions between Theory and Practice

University of Helsinki, October 5–7, 2011

KEYNOTE LECTURE ABSTRACT

Thursday, October 6th 2011, 10.45 am

House of Sciences and Letters (Tieteiden talo), Room 104, Kirkkokatu 6, 00170 Helsinki

Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good

JOEL ROBBINS

University of California, San Diego

By the 1980s, anthropology had left behind a focus on the study of societies defined as radically “other” to the anthropologists’ own. While the twilight of the anthropology of the other qua other was widely recognized, there was little consensus about who might replace this figure as the primary object of anthropological attention. In important respects, I argue, its replacement has been the suffering subject. Now, the subject living in pain, in poverty, or under conditions of oppression is often the one at the center of anthropological work. A focus on the suffering subject addresses some of the problems raised by the anthropology of the other. Yet some of the strengths of earlier work focused on the other – particularly some of its unique critical capacities – were also lost in the transition. In the second part of the paper, I thus consider how a recent trends connected to the anthropology of value and morality, on the one hand, and time and change, on the other, might coalesce in another shift of anthropological attention, this one toward an anthropology of the good capable of recovering some of the critical force of an earlier anthropology without taking on many of its weaknesses. I illustrate some of the potential of this new trend with reference to my work with Papua New Guinea converts to Christianity.