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cordially invites you to the
Annual IAS Lecture

Relativism and Critique: Anthropology, Rights, and the Comparative Study of the Good



A lecture by

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Nádor u. 9.

For much of its century-long existence, the discipline of anthropology has occupied a special place in Western thought by virtue of its insistence on bringing questions of cultural difference to bear on all manner of intellectual discussions. Over the last several decades, however, anthropology has begun to risk relinquishing this special role as it has largely abandoned the strong relativist arguments it was prepared to make in the past and has joined the other social sciences in focusing on the study of human suffering and other social phenomena it has come to understand in universal terms. In this lecture, I suggest that anthropology may recover some of its former critical potential by turning to the cross-cultural study of different ways human beings living in diverse societies define and try to achieve the good. Perhaps, I argue, anthropology can develop a relativism of the good to replace the broader relativism that is no longer in favor. As an example of what an anthropological contribution to a relativist study of the good might look like, I explore how Melanesian ideas about the crucial role of relationships in human life – ideas about what we might call the rights of relationships - raise important issues relevant to cotemporary discussions of the global applicability of the notion of human rights. If we can use such cross-cultural material about the diversity of human values to introduce a truly comparative component to currently vigorous and sometimes strident conversations about human rights, we will, I conclude, have a good indication of the promise of an emerging relativism of the good.

Joel Robbins is Sigrid Rausing Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. His work has focused on the anthropology of religion and ethics. In particular, he has contributed to the developing anthropology of Christianity, to the study of global Pentecostalism, and to theoretical debates concerning issues of radical cultural change and those around the role of values in social life. He is the author of the book *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* and was for thirteen years co-editor of the journal *Anthropological Theory*.