

Cultural Contagion in a New Key

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Nobody is perfect, and that is in itself a cause for celebration, but it is also an undisputable fact that it is humanity's lack of perfection, in any sense of the word, that gives anthropology and literature their *raison-d'être*. Just as there are many views of what human beings are and – not least – what they ought to be like, there are numerous forms of imperfection, ranging from poor eyesight and dishonesty to mechanical ineptness, dyslexia and, these days in our kind of society, obesity, adherence to Islam and recreational tobacco smoking. A peculiar but widespread form of imperfection pertains to the weakness of the will; the compulsion to do things one knows and believes that one ought not to do, activities one either deems immoral or just a waste of time. Some of us, possibly a majority, have a tendency to spend an inordinate amount of our limited time and energy on harmless eccentricities or time-consuming, but ultimately unrewarding obsessions, such as collecting bottlecaps or first editions of Bob Dylan LPs.

I have not, until now, seen myself as a collector. My own pastimes include playing the saxophone (too rarely for the time being), determined but so far literally fruitless attempts to grow citrus and grapes in Oslo, and a few other vaguely aimless and possibly frivolous, but as of the time of writing legal activities, none of which fall under the general rubric of 'collecting'. Or so I thought until the other day, when it occurred to me that I had begun to collect a particular kind of book, not in the spirit of the completist (a misguided person who believes in finite universes) but nonetheless in a focused and systematic way. I was walking through Gardermoen airport at six thirty in the morning, intending to catch the early flight to London, and – having got up two hours earlier – found myself in a state of confused inertia, barely able to remove my shoes when security personnel told me to.

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There is a good bookshop at Gardermoen, and like most of you, I am utterly unable to walk past any bookshop with a convincing impersonation of the disinterested bypasser. On this bleak March morning, I picked up, as I so often do, a paperback in the nonfiction section; too sleepy to read an unfinished PhD thesis or an article in the *JRAI*, I fancied perusing this select piece of light-hearted prose over coffee as we approached the Skagerak.

In spite of such ambitions, which recur whenever I am on a too early or too late flight, it cannot be denied that I frequently collapse weakly over the croissant soon after take-off, temporarily giving up the struggle against the primal impulse. This time was different. I ended up asking for a second cup of coffee, and had only read a dozen pages when it dawned upon me that I had become, without noticing, a collector of books which anthropologists ought to have written but for mysterious reasons hadn't.

The book in question is Malcolm Gladwell's bestseller, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make A Big Difference*, published in 2000 and reprinted many times since then. A friend who was doing some research on the sudden, almost epidemic spread of certain academic concepts (such as *social capital*, to mention one of the most recent examples), had recommended it to me two years earlier, and I had jotted down the title on a sticky note in my computer, but had somehow not got around to actually ordering it. It was about time, I understood as we flew along the coast of Jutland, that I read the book. Not that it is a work of genius (but then again, how many books are?), or contains case studies which are of such detail and quality that they can be re-used and reconceptualised at whim (which can be said of good ethnographies). Not that it was even strikingly original in its central idea (the concept of the tipping point was formulated by Morton Grodzins in the late 1950s (Grodzins 1958), and had been around in various guises as early as in Engels' dialectics of nature harking back to 1883).¹ Yet the book had an addictive quality; maybe it was just a good read, or perhaps the appeal consisted in the fact that it was constructed around a simple idea but used that idea to prop up, and make sense of, a great deal of otherwise bewildering social and cultural complexity? No, I think the force of *The Tipping Point* lies in its double achievement of offering a new way of looking at change and making the reader feel, if not like a genius, at least cognitively adequate, as the argument goes along. As you read, you keep mumbling to yourself, 'I should have thought about that,' or 'Of course, this is how it comes to be the way it is'. Yet the truth is that at least in my case, although

many of Gladwell's examples were familiar, I hadn't quite thought of them the way he wanted me to, and I learned something in the process. As a social scientist, or more specifically as an anthropologist, one cannot help thinking about ways in which his perspective (which, I repeat, is not wholly his, but he brought it out to hundreds of thousands of people, which is in itself a respectable achievement) could be made to do some useful work for us. To this I will return.

The book itself had gone well beyond its 'tipping point' by late 2000, when a reviewer from England reported about his difficulties in obtaining a copy, mentioning that a young bookshop attendant in the American city he was visiting had just purchased the last two copies in town for his friends. Yet, as soon as we're out of the field, we anthropologists are creatures of a monastic inclination (otherwise, we'd have been in broadcasting or business), and therefore it may just be the case that many of you, like me, missed the boat when it passed. On this background, a short summary of the book seems appropriate, for the benefit of people who are, like myself, too slow to discover trends until they are yesterday's news. (It can safely be assumed that most anthropologists are not, at least in this respect, the innovators Gladwell speaks of.)

The subtitle, 'How little things can make a big difference', rings a bell with anyone who read Rappaport or Bateson in their student days and learnt about thermostats and system disequilibria – or, for that matter, who have read any of the more recent, usually apocalyptic, books about climate change. What sets Gladwell apart from the system theorists is his deep interest in certain kinds of unusual individuals, what it is that makes them tick, and how their often innocent activities lead to momentous change, given the right circumstances. Unlike the John Gray who believes that men are of one kind and women of another (not to be confused with the John Gray of the LSE), Gladwell introduces a gender-neutral typology of outstanding individuals early on. First of all, however, he outlines his 'three laws of epidemics'. The central question raised in the book is how it can be that certain social and cultural phenomena suddenly 'take off' and become enormously widespread – on the very first page, he speaks of Hush Puppies shoes, commercially moribund and culturally unsexy for years, until they suddenly became fashionable again. The three basic principles are 'the law of the few' (most epidemics are started by one or at the most a handful of people), 'the stickiness factor' (most things that happen are forgettable, but some linger in a socially significant way), and 'the power of context' (it is not just a question of who and

what, but also how, when and where). Although he cites much experimental psychological research, Gladwell does not neglect the wider environment of his outstanding individuals and their projects.

The kinds of person most likely to start epidemics are 'connectors', 'mavens' and 'salesmen'. The connectors are the spiders of the social web, immensely sociable: they know 'everybody' and bring people together. The extraordinarily talented connector Lois Weinberg is described in some detail; she brought black jazz musicians and white art lovers together in Chicago in the 1950s, and she introduced Arthur C. Clarke to Isaac Asimov – just to mention a couple of her achievements at random. The mavens are the knowledgeable sifters of information, who can give highly qualified consumer advice and adjudicate on the good taste. The salesmen, finally, are the irresistible enthusiasts – one of Gladwell's informants describes himself as 'the most optimistic person you know [at the] hundredth power'. Innovators do not necessarily start epidemics; each of the three types may happen to be innovators, but as a rule, they are not. The innovators are generally too busy innovating to take heed of their social surroundings. Darwin needed the tireless campaigner Huxley just as Marx needed the socially flexible and amiable Engels.

Not all characters of these kinds start social epidemics, but some do. A tragically successful salesman was the flight attendant Gaetan Dugas, who claimed to have 2,500 lovers around North America at the outset of the AIDS epidemic. Another, perhaps unwitting, salesman was the tv journalist Peter Jennings, whose subtle pro-Reagan facial mimics and tone of voice (identified by a psychologist doing meticulous research on the Reagan–Mondale debates) may have tipped the scales in favour of Reagan.

Some of the salesman examples can be dismissed as simple marketing advice informed by popular psychology, but the fact remains that if it is true, and of course it is, that a few outstanding individuals can make a huge difference in social dramas and social change, then anthropologists should take notice.

Connectors overlap only partly with salesmen; many of the former have nothing to sell, they just like people and are easily liked by others. One of Gladwell's main examples here is the revolutionary hero Paul Revere, who rode through the New England countryside on a dark night in 1775 to alert the Yankee villagers of a planned attack by the British army. Lots of people knew who he was, most of them listened to him, and the British were accordingly met with unexpectedly well organised resistance. Another man

who rode about as far as Revere, with the same aim, accomplished next to nothing. Gladwell cites academic research and his own informal research among friends, which shows that some people are extremely well connected (with thousands of acquaintances) whereas many know relatively few. It does not require much of an imagination to see the sociological significance of such differences.

The category of the maven consists in people who are not just above-average informed, but who also seem to be obsessed by a desire to tell others what to do and how to do it. (We've all met them, haven't we?) This desire, in Gladwell's analysis, explains why they can start epidemics.

Stickiness, the main principle of contagion, gives a generic answer to the question of why some attempted 'epidemics' actually take off while most do not. Obviously there are many ways in which this can happen, often surprising ones (knotty and convoluted books become bestsellers, weak political ideas become popular, riots based on flimsy oppositional ideas grow into national catastrophes, etc.), and Gladwell's examples in this chapter largely deal with American popular culture – but it must be agreed that the question is worth asking.

Finally, Gladwell spends two chapters discussing what he calls context, of which we might speak, in our tribal language, as relatedness. He describes dynamics of interaction with variable outcomes depending on the social 'input' into the situation, most of it familiar to anthropologists.

And yes, he has found a good case in the anthropological literature as well. Wrongly, or at least controversially, describing the evolutionary scholar Robin Dunbar as an anthropologist, Gladwell later uses an example from social anthropology proper (the source is Donald Rubinstein), namely the 'contagious' spread of teenage suicides or attempted suicides in Micronesia after one teenager's much publicised suicide following a trivial argument with his father. It sounds like a grotesque re-enactment of the European suicide wave following the publication of Goethe's *Young Werther*, but Gladwell interestingly compares it with the unexpected rise in teenage smoking in the USA.

Many non-fiction bestsellers of this kind are brief fads, tuned into a fleeting *Zeitgeist* and complacently feeding it with anecdotes, popularisation of research (or, often, popularisation of popularisations), common prejudices and poorly substantiated generalisations. Gladwell's book is different. It bursts with ideas, some of them homespun, some sifted from the literature. He speculates on the upper limit of the number of persons 'one can truly love' (he claims

the limit is twelve), he argues – this is where Dunbar comes in – that 150 fully paid-up members is the upper limit to an informal organisation based on trust and mutual familiarity, he presents the ‘twenty-eighty rule’, which is the view, held by some, that twenty per cent ‘do eighty per cent of the work’ in most contexts, as in ‘twenty per cent of all beer drinkers drink eighty per cent of all beer’. He muses over the apparent fact that nobody is likely to intervene at the scene of a crime if there are many witnesses, whereas it is more likely that someone intervenes if he or she is the sole witness. He has, in brief, discovered the beauty and the magic of good social science thinking, distilling what he has found into one big idea: epidemics are begun by few persons of whom there are three kinds, ideas and practices need a special quality to stick, and context is crucial. But his main conclusion seems to be that interpersonal communication works better than large-scale campaigns if you want to make a difference.

Some of you may still wonder why I bother with this cheap middle-brow book, which skips so lightly over methodological issues, jumps from one decontextualised example to the next, flirts shamelessly with the reader and recirculates ideas that have earlier been presented in academically respectable ways by scholars like Mark Granovetter (1978) and Thomas Schelling (1978). The main reason is that the book can, read in the right frame of mind, open up new research areas and inspire new perspectives in anthropology. As a contribution to the understanding of collective behaviour and the spread of ideas, *The Tipping Point* is far more sophisticated than the pseudo-Darwinian pseudo-science of memetics (developed from what was really an experiment of thought in Dawkins 1976), in spite of the latter’s loud and confident verbal pyrotechnics. Memeticists tend to claim that ideas spread because they ‘compete for brain space’ (they ‘compete’ for *what?*); Gladwell, and others who think like him, move a necessary step further in trying to identify which factors (personal acquaintance, trust, psychological needs, the right time and place etc.) account for the extraordinarily rapid spread of certain phenomena and not others. The book has Goffmanesque qualities in its ability to make much out of a little (quite the opposite of what Jared Diamond does in his, in their own way impressive, books, cf. Diamond 2005) or rather, in the conviction that the apparently trivial can have huge consequences as soon as the snowball starts rolling.

It must be conceded that Gladwell’s ‘types’ of individual have some first cousins in the anthropological canon. The most obvious is the Barthian

entrepreneur (Barth 1963), who is quite clearly someone who makes things happen. Yet Gladwell's cast is richer than Barth's: the entrepreneur is simply someone who bridges formerly discrete spheres, and that's what he does. Gladwell, for his part, introduces several kinds of person who 'make things happen' in different ways; empirically derivative, the book is still richer at the level of creative ideas than many impeccable anthropology books. It is a creative book not so much because of what it creates itself (which, to be honest, is modest – the same examples keep cropping up again and again), but because it stimulates creativity in the reader.

At the end of the day, we must ask ourselves (mustn't we?) what a book such as this one would have looked like if it had been written by an anthropologist aiming to reach a new set of readers – that is, people who are neither paid to read whatever one writes (colleagues) nor people who are forced to (students), but citizens who would critically thumb the book in an airport bookshop somewhere in the world, before tipping in its direction.

That book would obviously have to be comparative. It would draw on existing anthropological research and add snippets and stories from the author's own fieldwork and life-world. Whereas Gladwell limits himself to a North Atlantic, chiefly US, world inhabited by people subjected to roughly the same cultural constraints and values, the anthropological author would problematise the implicit premise of a shared human nature. Perhaps s/he would discover, as some anthropologists have, that the entrepreneurial type is universal although his or her culturally defined ends vary; or perhaps s/he would conclude that relative to the North Atlantic societies, an entirely different set of people set things in motion in Central Africa or the Amazon. One would have to look carefully at the anthropological record of, say, cargo cults (Melanesia), ghostdances (North America), rituals of rebellion (Southern Africa) and Pentecostalism (everywhere), perhaps adding historical examples like popular Communism, Galileo's popularisation of the Copernican revolution, Caribbean slave revolts, British abolitionism and a few contemporary consumption fads. In the end, one might earn the hostility of a few colleagues, the admiration of grateful readers everywhere, and one would, through the back door, submit a bid for a reorientation in the study of cultural diffusion and change. A certain recklessness is all it takes. And some undiluted enthusiasm. And, last but not least, a burning faith in the potential of anthropology to make a difference is essential.

Note

1. Engels spoke of the transition from mere quantitative change to qualitative change as a process whereby growth reaches what we could call a tipping-point leading to the total transformation of the system. In other words, he saw his own revolutionary dreams fulfilled in nature, yet the idea of threshold values is respectable and used to good effect in system theory, ecology and elsewhere, for example in Marshall McLuhan's 'tetrads' where a particular media phenomenon, given sufficient growth, suddenly 'flips into its opposite'. (Nice idea? Definitely. Good idea? Perhaps not.)

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