



ANTHROPOLOGY RESEARCH TEAM

OCCASIONAL LECTURES AND EVENT SERIES

Lecture invitation Thursday 17 Jan. 14:30-16:00
Borealis lecture room 313, Arctic Centre,

Beyond the Suffering Subject: Anthropology, Rights, and the Comparative Study of the Good

Joel Robbins

(University of California San Diego)

ABSTRACT: For much of its century-long existence, the discipline of anthropology 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, anthropology has begun to risk relinquishing this special role as it has joined the other social sciences in focusing on the study of human suffering and other social phenomena largely in universal terms. In this lecture, I explore how anthropology arrived at the point of considering the surrender of its place in the Western conversation, and I suggest that it 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. As an example of what an anthropological contribution to such a discussion 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 anthropology of the good.

Author: Joel Robbins is professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, San Diego and currently Jane and Aatos Erkko Visiting Professor in Studies on Contemporary Society at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. He is currently co-editor of the journal *Anthropological Theory*. His background is in symbolic, semiotic and structural anthropology. He is one of the world's leading scholars in the Anthropology of religion and cultural change.

More info: fstammle@ulapland.fi