

REVIEW ARTICLE

**ETHNOGRAPHY AND GENERAL THEORY
OR PEOPLE VERSUS HUMANKIND**

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RICHARD FARDON (ed.), *Localizing Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing*, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press / Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press 1990. x, 357 pp., Index. £17.50.

At the 1986 American Anthropological Association meetings in Philadelphia, Arjun Appadurai convened a panel called 'Place and Voice'. The aim was to discuss relations between regional ethnography and 'metropolitan' theory.¹ Two months or so later, having planned the event two years before, Richard Fardon convened a conference at St. Andrews 'to examine the dialectic between regional and theoretical factors in the development of monograph writing' (p. ix). The tendencies in anthropology that gave both conveners pause for thought still flourish like the green bay tree, and the Fardon volume provokes reflection.²

1. For the resulting papers, see *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. III, no. 1, 1988. Unfortunately, Friedrich chose not to include his admirable piece to which I refer below. The use of 'metropolitan' to describe sociological theory in such contexts as the present one is Appadurai's.

2. The contributors to the volume and their subjects are: McKnight on Australia, Riches on Eskimology, James on Sudan and Ethiopia, Tonkin on West Africa, Werbner on South-Central Africa (a very welcome reprint), Parkin on East Africa, Strathern on Melanesia, Gilsenan on the (western) Middle East, Street on the (eastern) Middle East, Burghart on India, Kapferer on Sri Lanka, Hobart on Bali, and Moeran on Japan.

Reading Skills

The shadow of the 'writing culture' movement hangs over most of the papers here. Fardon's introduction provides a good critical summary of the issues, and he rightly distinguishes James Clifford from the epigones. Still, a mention of Hayden White would help: Clifford, after all, tries to do for anthropology what White did for history some years ago—and one of the attractive things about White's work (see White 1978, 1987) was the way 'the burden of history' never quite disappeared into textuality. Clifford, for his part, despite his skill, ends up with a gap between humanism and determinism, which 'textuality' covers unconvincingly: 'It is as if Clifford covertly recognizes two historical periods: a period of Anglo-French imperialism marked by political inequalities, and another of American ascendancy during which politics have become textually internalized' (Fardon, p. 12). We are now in the latter. The supposed links, or lack of them, between texts and politics dominate the literature, while style establishes authors' claims to be thought politically correct. But as Rabinow notes (cited by Fardon, p. 16), no one's credentials are stamped by denouncing a dead colonialism. We are constantly faced with inauthenticities that have long been a joke in literary criticism—the 'dangers of the text', for instance, which really amount to the risk of paper-cuts.

How much this has to do with the practice of anthropology is doubtful. This is not (*pace* Fardon) because style and content are separable, but because few issues are entirely new. Moeran's discussion of his own work, for instance, explains how dropping the dates from his material freed him to write more tellingly: 'I found I was able to collapse time, to take totally separate entries from my written journals and place them together thematically' (p. 349). Those snared in current muddles over fact and fiction might think this either 'literary' or dishonest. But all ethnographers do something like this. The last explicit go around the subject simply happened to run the other way: the Manchester school's 'extended case method' was aimed precisely at the practice of 'apt illustration' (see e.g. Gluckman 1967: xiii-xiv), and the failure of their attempts to analyse 'total process' was exemplary. Descriptions are always partial. Many problems have occurred before in less exotic language than that of modern textualism, and one fears anthropologists less well read than Moeran have discovered they were speaking prose all these years. Indeed, the wide acceptance of 'ethnographies as texts' as, in effect, a new paradigm tends to rob one of means to read anthropology.³

3. 'The essays [in *Writing Culture*] do not claim ethnography is only "literature"' (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 26). One of the unintended consequences of the movement, however, was that many students concluded that all ethnographies were 'fictions' and thus much of a muchness, which was not the point. To recover the value of the movement one almost has to go back to where it started (e.g. Marcus and Cushman 1982). But it seems fair to say that the 'writings on writing' with the greatest audience have been precisely those that show little sense of context.

A properly reflexive anthropology would be one aware of its own history, and thus alert to where its concepts come from—able, among other things, to think what in fact has changed when problems seem to reappear. But much recent ‘theory’ (I shall justify those quotation marks as I go along) seems directed at an audience that reads very little and for whom anthropology’s past disappears into mist ten years ago. Nothing could be more at odds with the subject’s practice. Where psychology and sociology do indeed work mainly with new publications, anthropologists use even old journals, let alone old books, almost as much as recent ones (MacLeod 1985; see also Beattie 1971). An illusion of unilinear progress requires sorting grain from chaff: ‘theories may be discarded as erroneous but ethnography always has some redeemable value and may be subjected endlessly to reanalysis’ (Fardon, p. 4), for instance; so Malinowski the field-worker seems contemporary and Malinowski the theoretician an exotic fossil. It depends how one sets about this, and of course what one means by ‘theory’. Models? Methods? The kind of claims Malinowski made about a ‘school’ of anthropology? Whichever of these, theory is as open as ethnography to reanalysis, and ethnography as much engrossed as theory with practicalities of time and place.⁴ But genealogies that mark only anthropologists no longer seem satisfactory.

Herzfeld’s *Anthropology Through the Looking Glass* (1987; thus after the Fardon conference) does an excellent job of locating such issues in Mediterranean anthropology. Not only is ‘theory’, in the sense here of a set of interests (an agenda for research, perhaps), linked persuasively to what was written at different times, but academic and local interests are shown to be entangled also, encompassed by claims that centre upon ‘Europe’. To show this requires reference to the myths of classical Greece and to constant reworkings of that imagery since the early nineteenth century. Again, the changing agenda of research in India makes sense within a larger history (see particularly Cohn 1968), which in this case can be traced back at least to Hegel (Appadurai 1988b).

Several papers in the Fardon volume remind one how far back current interests reach, though the spread of such interests has itself been recent. Kapferer, for instance, starts convincingly with Robert Knox on Ceylon, in the seventeenth century, to show the effects of emphasis on one region within Sri Lanka (pp. 280 ff.)—not an obvious move to make twenty years ago. One is also reminded that the subject lacks natural boundaries. Anything may be pressed to use in making sense of what we read and find. The breadth of possible references, as well as the subject’s indeterminate depth historically, requires that anthropology, more than most things, be always read symptomatically: this establishes, on the one hand, the

4. It should also be said that time and place determine ‘theory’s’ value. Leach’s ‘Rethinking Anthropology’ (1961), for instance, takes its value from the assumptions against which he wrote and which until then seemed natural to many. Malinowski’s ‘The Group and the Individual in Functional Analysis’ (1939) by contrast, was not so much simply bad as surplus: it answered no ethnographic need.

significance of the pieces read and, on the other, the reader's own position. The products are highly various, and ways of reading define one's colleagues more clearly than do ways of writing.

Anthropology exists less in paradigms, or even departments now, than in what people read and how. But as the breadth of possible reference widens (more journals, more books, more conferences), so disagreements on how one selects from this become more pressing. The problems are all too obvious (common sense looks to others like coded language), but no obvious remedy is in sight, for if one passively accepts the current 'theory' (language coded elsewhere) then ethnography itself becomes clumsy if not redundant. *Localizing Strategies* and its kin suggest at least a shift of interest. Let us argue over what in fact we do instead of over what we claim. Fardon's volume offers the superficial paradox of a book on separate area-traditions addressing a fairly general audience without a discrete topic (no 'kinship' here, nor 'politics'; sub-title aside, it is not about 'writing'), in which perspective the unity of anthropology looks rather different and slightly odd. Though the mechanism receives no close attention, a good many people turn out to know butter from margarine. Not paradigms, but skills and problems are what we share—and an interest, of course, in how problems differ from place to place.

Language still nags, for instance. Gilsenan (p. 228) is politely diffident about the diffidence shown ethnographers of the Arab world who had studied Arabic. But societies with apparently quite different concepts of causality and the like ('classic' societies, one could have said some years ago) were too often those for whose languages we lacked a dictionary. Ignorance was bliss indeed:

The result has been that the anthropology of complex non-Western societies has, till recently, been a second class citizen in anthropological discourse. This...involves a kind of reverse Orientalism, whereby complexity, literacy, historical depth and structural messiness operate as disqualifications in the struggle of places for a voice in metropolitan theory. (Appadurai 1986: 357)

It is questionable whether that struggle matters much, and Indian ethnography was in any case (so the rest of us thought) what broke the jinx. Still, the primitive world, whether fact or fiction, is nowadays hard to come by: 'as the societies under consideration become more complex, literate and historical, the kind of decontextualization that facilitates generalization becomes harder to accomplish' (ibid.: 359). Our 'localizing strategies' seem not to keep up with this, and language remains the index: 'it is impossible, given the usual period of fieldwork of 12-18 months, for a fieldworker to learn them all [i.e. all the different tongues used in an Aborigine settlement]. Hence fieldworkers normally concentrate on one language' (McKnight, p. 57). Even that should give pause for thought. Admittedly language-learning in outback Australia or highland New Guinea must be intensive. But Arabic in a year? Mandarin Chinese? Tamil? What is the difference? This

particular nettle no one grasps, though it flowers where Appadurai points to problems.⁵

Assuming that ethnographers of different regions are roughly comparable, those studying the Arab world (or China or India) have to wonder of New Guinea (or Australia or the Amazon Basin) how much ethnographic error is lost in regional and dialect difference—we certainly misprise things easily in fieldwork, so do our colleagues in the bush somehow not? Those studying New Guinea have to wonder for their part (and so they should) what ethnographers of the Arab world (or China, or India) lose by consulting dictionaries when in doubt, which in practice happens often and notoriously flattens regional differences. In both cases, presumably, the anthropologist's practice aligns with local assumptions about hierarchy and comparability—in short, with local definitions that largely construct for us our objects of analysis. One can imagine a Fardonesque volume on the subject.

Such problems, however, and our awareness of them, are exactly what characterize anthropology. Lexical concerns are one space of several (the most obvious, perhaps; certainly the most discussed) that open towards over-interpretation or, more barbarously, 'over-trope'. Part of anthropology is spotting how one slips into this. When we do slip, we collapse the ethnographic process and present ourselves with an aspect of what we started with. Regardless of whether one knows a region in detail, one can often enough spot the chance of such slippage; and concern for this turns out to be common to people who work in areas that are otherwise very different. Anthropology, like history, consists of disparate practices tied together, when at all, by what Friedrich (see note 1 above) calls 'craftsmanship'. This remains so within a changing world that makes studying the erstwhile 'primitives' more like studying the erstwhile 'orient', or indeed more like studying Europe.

One of the nice things about the Fardon volume is that several contributors have the honesty to invoke their craftly standards, 'standards...by which [for instance] we should judge at least parts of this text [on the 'Nipnip' Nuer] as rubbish' (James, p. 125). We work by such standards constantly. It is foolish to pretend, when 'theory' gets loose (here with the sense of an unsecured claim to precedence), that we have none, for this only mislocates our problems. 'Writing', for one, was no panacea. Many of those writing about writing on culture write not very cultured prose: indeed, some seem incapable of a lucid sentence. Geertz, to take the opposite case, is scarcely lost for a crafted phrase or two (he is sometimes in the Ronald Firbank class), but too often he dazzles where a steady light is needed. Impatience with his work stems from other causes, which Hobart touches on here and has touched on elsewhere (1986: 146) in terms that, were ethnography

5. McKnight himself is very clear that language-learning is an index of the problem, not the problem itself. Rather, it falls within a general pattern of Australian studies where everything seems to happen 'just too late' (p. 51).

the only issue, would be simply damning.⁶ The terms are much like those suggested earlier, of collapsing the ethnographic process, presenting oneself with a mirrored image. Yet here is another sense of 'theory'—not a set of interests, but a summary example that claims a wider than usual audience and inserts anthropology's terms in common discourse (cf. Fardon, p. 24; Marcus and Cushman 1982: 51-3).

'Theory', then, has several senses. As a humble referent the term is useless, though its persuasive power can be quite strong. Recent interest in politics (at least, political language) and historicity (thus far, primarily, that of our own subject) seems in fact to turn around a more careful, less dramatic, practice of producing sense without over-interpretation, and language is the obvious case. As the subject becomes more popular we also have a problem of audience. On the one hand, those we rely on to get the point start to seem like cliques. On the other, an enormous readership is willing to consume if not ethnography, then certainly anthropology. We should not be surprised if generalities become the currency of rank and precedence, and 'theory' as it were the colour of the money.

Theory as Something New

Geertz's role as the Margaret Mead of his generation was an extreme case of a common phenomenon, one that requires we remember anthropology's place in the larger world of such things as literary weeklies. Certain modes of writing, it seems, key into our readers' wishes (the image of individual actors elaborating meaning has been with us for years now), and they provide, to put the matter bluntly, means to fame and to self-advancement. The point has been made repeatedly, but more of the literature should have been cited in Fardon's volume. As it is, disagreement with 'star figures' comes off too smugly as wicked America versus righteous Britain (or righteous Europe, to make the numbers up), whereas, in fact, the bulk of criticism has been from American-based or American-trained authors:⁷ it is there more than here that one has to deal with 'a climate of competition which favours overbidding' (Dumont's diplomatic phrase). Yet the

6. The defensive phrase 'Geertz envy' has come into use on certain American circuits as if criticism were in bad taste. This will not do. If the emperor's clothes are threadbare, he should simply not strut about like this.

7. Which having been said, the distinction between American and non-American authors is better dropped in a list of things to read on these subjects: e.g. Rabinow 1985, 1986; Keesing 1987; Sangren 1988; Spencer 1989. Sangren is particularly interesting and, to judge from several angry responses, struck a nerve. In their reply to him, 'Michael M. J. Fischer and George E. Marcus, with Stephen A. Tyler' (1988) (why are they listed like a TV production team?) go so far as to muddle together ethnography, post-modernism and the first atom bomb.

structure of publishing, if nothing else, ties us all to the same problems. The general and the new become elided as part of marketing, again with slightly odd results.⁸

Fardon contends that the appearance of 'paradigm shifts' and 'crises' is often contrived (p. 4), and he says of Marcus and Fischer (p. 16)—to take only one example—that 'by chapters 5 and 6 of their book, the new in "new writing" has become synonymous with little more than recent'. Even this is not quite the point. Agreed that in academia ('small world', indeed) we are all meant to know what's now and wow,⁹ yet arriving in 1984 in an American department where 'the cutting edge' was sought for self-advancement, and up-to-dateness therefore highly prized, one found that the now and the wow at issue were the same now and wow of ten years earlier: Foucault, Derrida and the usual gang, with the solitary addition of Mikhail Bakhtin.¹⁰ The rediscovered ethnographers of Marcus and Clifford's world have an odd familiarity also: Bateson and Leenhardt, for instance, were long ago features of Rodney Needham's reading lists, which one presumes was a matter not of trendiness but again of telling butter from margarine. There comes a point where you cannot tell if reading Bateson, say, was terribly advanced or backward.

The notion of discrete 'theoretical time' is *prima facie* implausible (note how strong a move in the theory wars it remains to exhume dead ancestors, never mind the odd fixity of those now and wow reading lists) and it scarcely reflects how the subject works. Area ethnographies are, at least, out of phase. If Gilsenan (p. 231) can bemoan the long dominance of 'village studies' in the Middle East, and Parkin can seek an escape from similar problems through de Heusch's claim to something like a 'great tradition' in Africa (p. 185), then McKnight can still regret, at the same conference, the Aboriginalists' taste for books that consider more than one group at once—'a convention [sadly, it seems]...at variance with the norm of the intensive monograph elsewhere' (p. 53). Quarrels over who is the more advanced can be left to the less well read and the more ambitious. Different regions have their own problems. The terms mean different things in each. But an interesting by-product of *Localizing Strategies* and its kin is that linear histories of 'metropolitan theory' itself lose their attraction as all but a source of rough labels. If the mid-1950s were 'the high point of structural-functional accounts', and thus an apt

8. Inflation of this kind is nothing new with novels. Memoirs of forty years ago, perhaps even ninety years ago, complain of every third work being hailed as a work of genius. Nor is playing for a general audience new to anthropology (Malinowski's *Sex and Repression* is a famous case). But the elision of the general with the new is striking. See the publishers' advertisements and (sadly) the reviews in most current journals of anthropology.

9. This valuable phrase I owe to Michael Fahy, who in turn attributes it to the noted Bronx nationalist Rick Bucci.

10. One suspects that not even a list of approved authors is quite the crux of the matter. There are those who came to Bakhtin through 'theory', those who heard of him through Dostoevsky (more often, to be exact, through V. S. Pritchett), and those innocents who have still not heard of him. For people in the first category, the other two categories could as well be one.

time for Laura Bohannon to publish reminiscence in novel form (p. 7), they were also the high point of many anti-structural-functionalist efforts whose kinship to their opponent was less apparent then than now. In short, we no longer use existing literature to keep time (to decide who is nearest the 'cutting edge', for instance) but to establish who and where we are in a world rather larger than anthropology.

We should not pretend as part of this that new ideas are all old ones (nor is nostalgia an honest option). Current interests in textual metaphors, in poetics, in literary criticism are all genuine additions to anthropology, just as has been people's reading Foucault (rather less so Derrida) and taking note of political economy. Interests in different historicities and in forms of action are new. The major objection to the interests Clifford promotes could only be that the readings are still not 'close' enough. The problem arises when such interests serve as claims to authority, for anthropology, whatever else it is, is not a positive science.

The sciences themselves no longer look as they did. That too is part of what has changed—or should have done. Foucault and Derrida remain intensely fashionable (intensely misread also), but the same milieu that produced them produced also the rediscovery of Gaston Bachelard, whose writing on the history of science approved an 'anabaptist' philosophy: science in practice produced its own concepts, regardless of how philosophers said the world worked, and philosophy could not do more than aid their emergence and tidy up the world of ideas afterwards. The theme was taken up in Marxism, where the moral was drawn that theory's claims to govern practice were extremely suspect.¹¹ To understand the world required, however, theoretical effort (the sense here was of not leaving analytical terms 'unthought')—a Feyerbandian free-for-all left ideology intact. Nor did it locate the author in a world where subjects of their nature are decentred—which was surely the single point to grasp if post-structuralism (much talked of in the years since then) is not to be pre-structuralism simply new and improved with added Frenchmen. The author's position *vis-à-vis* readers and those written about is at issue, not a choice between tropology and objectivity. The joke has been that general 'theory' acquired such prominence in a world that (for 'theoretical' reasons, if you like) no longer has a legitimate place for it—and has not had for some time.

Whatever the sources, anthropology has internalized much that once looked like separable theory (here with the 'meta-narrative' sense; the commentary that legitimates what one does next). Works carry with them, in a way they did less before, a care for intellectual context. The range of reference, not least historical, that now routinely colours books and papers is an index of what has happened. Paradigms have given way to what looks like a 'sense of the past':

11. See Jenkins 1974, 1975. For a map of the French academic field at the time, see Lemert 1981. For an excellent introduction to what the issues were (and perhaps still are), see Soper 1986.

Without the sense of the past we might be more certain, less weighted down and apprehensive. We might also be less generous, and certainly we would be less aware. In any case, we have the sense of the past and we must live with it, and by it.

And we must read our literature by it... (Trilling 1951: 185)

By comparison, talk of general theory and of breaks with what came before has often come to look trivial. Marcus and Fischer's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (widely read and cited if any book has been in the last five years) was full of this: 'The essential tension fueling this kind of experimentation resides in the fact that experience has always been more complex than the representation of it that is permitted by traditional techniques of description and analysis in social-scientific writing' (Marcus and Fischer 1986: 43). The implication that 'non-traditional' techniques might not be less complex than experience betrays either dull experience or a strange conceit about one's place in a story as yet unwritten. The claim to be new has itself come to look old-fashioned.

In practice, the last several years have seen a 'growing tendency to produce careful, ethnographically based regional collections' (Appadurai 1986: 361), and the interest seems again to lie more with monographs than with pithy articles. This will not last for ever. Obstructions will build up more or less unnoticed, and we can all be surprised when shown what in fact they were; there lies another sense of 'theory', that of Wittgenstein's letting the fly from the bottle,¹² a sense compatible with 'anabaptist' interests. For the moment, however, the texture of ethnography seems in general rich. Major works routinely concentrate on unpacking the representations of at least local 'great traditions' (e.g. Fuller 1984), very often of missionary work (e.g. Fernandez 1982, James 1988), of colonial powers (e.g. Dirks 1987) and of nation-states (e.g. Davis 1987): even studies in particular villages show a keen appreciation of time and place (e.g. Boddy 1989; a particularly distinguished case). In what passed for 'theory' at the same period, all this was lost in an encounter between us (whoever 'we' might be) and the Other.¹³ The more conspicuous works of recent years thus already seem thin and to have formed a too-coherent knot.

The effect of claims to theoretical authority was to generalize anthropology's object, which ceased to be people and became instead 'humankind'. (Inclusive language made that much difference; it used to be called 'man'.) This bland confection, much the same in its essentials anywhere, could be analysed or interpreted, without reference to the past, by an equally unlocatable anthropologist.

12. Will that seem an in-group reference? Not so long ago it was common currency. The idea is simply that 'philosophical problems' arise from faulty questions—which may not be true of much philosophy but is certainly true of most ethnography.

13. Only recently did one realize who the Other is, that vast featureless being, well-intentioned and yet threatening, who haunts much current theory-writing: it is Mr Stay-Puft, the marsh-mallow man, in *Ghostbusters*.

The fantasy took many forms: not only 'the interpretive turn' itself, but ethnography as personal experience (e.g. Briggs 1970); the quest for 'woman' (e.g. Shostak 1981); the habit of taking 'texts' as the form of life; and, not least of course, the original 'reflexivity' (e.g. Dwyer 1982), which portrayed ethnography as two people in the void with a tape-recorder. All of this, as Hobart says (p. 311), presumed 'an antic theory of individual and society'.¹⁴ But it also invites, as if all proper selves were similar, a warm glow of fellow-feeling in readers' participation, and one rather thought someone (Hobart perhaps?) might quote, from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera on kitsch: 'Kitsch causes two tears to fall in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!' It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.

Anthropology's Position

The point of anthropology is judicious assessment of the sense people's worlds and actions make, and to make them the same so thoughtlessly is to deprive each one of us of moral autonomy. Space must be left for the people studied. This is not a matter of 'polyphony' (let us use what tricks we may, by all means) but of keeping clear that accounts are partial and that the author's position is not that of the people written about—which is surely where Bakhtin might have been of use. Unfortunately, the principle by which groups of 'humankind' were separated out (at least in some traditions) underwent a surreptitious change that confused things further, and further collapsed the relation between readers, writers and people written about. 'Culture' had been a handy, undefined term with vague associations of the 'superorganic': an attribute of groups, perhaps, and harmless enough when these groups were all neatly separate. Now they were not, it became the stuff that binds groups together and increasingly an attribute of individuals. The wider world took over anthropology's term of too casual art. Certain parts of the subject (the process, one fears, has hardly started) became managers of this mystic substance, transmitting it back and forth in terms not mediated by history, class or structure of any kind.¹⁵ One can only be thankful that ethnography kept dropping

14. Hobart has a sharp nose for cant. But, particularly having quoted Butler ('For learned nonsense has a deeper sound...'), he should know to avoid words like 'amaurotic' (p. 312), 'allelomorphic' (ibid.) and 'autolatrous' (p. 330). Cynics will turn to his next paper expecting lots of difficult words that begin with B.

15. One hesitates to cite cases for fear of the point seeming just *ad hominem*. Yet the literature has been littered recently with ethnographers writing primarily of themselves as a 'type' of person.

what terms were not of use to it and left space for the people studied in the gaps of its reworking. The dispersal of ethnographic practice proved valuable. If anthropology now seems 'all margins anyhow' (Gilsenan, p. 238), well, most of it usually has been. Yet our own autonomy, with the resulting lack of certainty that we are ever right, seems always to worry people.

One of the odder features of the Fardon volume, and of others like it, is, therefore, that everyone feels left out, or nearly everyone. Eskimology has 'a lowly place in the anthropological collective conscious' (p. 71); 'Africanists...at the conference owned to a common sense of marginality' (p. 94); bookshops used to file Middle East ethnography under area, not under anthropology (p. 228; they still do, of course); 'the reputation of South Asianists in Social Anthropology is not a very good one' (p. 260). Admittedly, the first essay starts on a more confident note—'It is hard to imagine anthropology without Australian Aborigines...'; but even Aboriginalists, it turns out, suffered 'isolation, and the concomitant feeling of being out of the main academic stream...' (p. 62). So much so that many went to work elsewhere, presumably in search of real anthropology. Everything turns on an absent centre. So, is there a ghost haunting anthropology, or is this a case of mild hysteria? We should know, having read our Todorov, not to ask.

The important thing is how the illusion works. Ethnographic fields are 'pre-constituted' by regionally specific histories—colonialism, trade, missionaries, whatever it may be (Fardon, p. 24). Other subjects form part of the field—so sometimes historians get there first and anthropologists try to carve a niche for themselves (Europe would be the extreme case), sometime historians arrive later and anthropologists are on the defensive (West Africa; Tonkin, p. 144); sometimes imaginative literature pre-defines an area, sometimes only ethnography allows such literature to flourish (Ethiopia and Sudan; James, p. 96). But there are privileged spots where anthropologists talk to hardly anyone. If the *anthropology* of the Middle East loses its stress in an endeavour shared with historians and economists (Gilsenan, p. 238), and the anthropologists of India are engaged with textualists (Burghart, p. 270), then those studying New Guinea, say, talk to no one but other anthropologists—'real' anthropology seems defined by the lack of anyone else's interest. The absent centre lies inland of Port Moresby. Add to this that other subjects, once away from area-specific detail, then come to us in search of 'theory' (the legacy of Lévi-Strauss's fame?) and one has the recipe for endless self-doubt, not to mention *nostalgie de brousse*. If ethnography is indeed the 'anabaptist' part of things, however, then the doubts of those who feel peripheral are misplaced. Anthropology as such is not worth the worry (again, see Beattie 1971), though as a space in which to work and a source of ideas it deserves protecting.

Fittingly, one of the more confident pieces in *Localizing Strategies* is Marilyn Strathern's on Melanesia. Much anthropology, she argues, has worked by inversion. But one has to expose the inversion's base, as with contrasting gift economies and commodity systems where 'what has to be cancelled is the apparent basis of comparison, which here would be the idea of "economy"' (p. 211)—which

in turn, one has to say, is what we did in our student essays and what students generally still do. Agreed that single contrasts are inadequate,

Perhaps a staged encounter could be set up between alien conversers—Trobriand and Maori, for example. For the anthropologist, unable to represent the one completely in terms of the other, would use his or her Western concepts to mediate between the two in such a way as to give the analytical language the status of a visible third voice. (Strathern, p. 212)

‘Audible’ would be more to the point with voices, third or otherwise, but the general idea is excellent—and, one has to say, well within that set of ideas made common by structuralism decades back. One moment of anthropologists’ thought does seem like a kaleidoscope, where the distance is the same from all patterns to the watcher’s eye (Dresch 1988). Probably this is indispensable.

Yet presenting anthropology to the wider world (keep an eye on that changing audience) reveals a structure of conceptual distance much like that Edmund Leach concocted for animals, sex and naughty words. Ethnographies as wholes are not equivalent. Amazonian Indians or New Guinea Highlanders, and even the Nuer if one leaves out their recent history, all seem ‘other’ enough to be unworrying: if they do strange things, it is part of their ‘culture’; or as ‘people without history’ they form part of our own great tale, subjects (or objects) of colonial wickedness. The Indian caste system, by contrast, is an outrage to the liberal mind (Dumont was right enough there) and altogether too close to home, if only through its sheer longevity. The Islamic world is worse still, falling right on the boundary between home and the wild: the literate public find it hard to see the Middle East as people doing something other than we do; they see it all too easily as people doing what we do but apparently with perverse incompetence—hence some real taboos on the area’s study and a popular sense of something akin to panic. Europe is, in some respects, more difficult still. Japan presents problems. ‘Within particular nations,’ says Rosaldo (1988: 79), ‘those who most nearly resemble “ourselves” appear to be “people without culture”....’ This illusion in fact is widespread and distributed untidily over national boundaries. False resemblance is as much a problem as exoticism ever was. If one subscribes to the idea of ‘culture’ in this sense (not everyone does, of course), then Rosaldo is right that some places have far too much of it and others have far too little. The degree to which, for political and intellectual reasons, an area needs constructing (or for that matter, deconstructing) varies hugely from case to case: only then does the kaleidoscope process work.

There are vast imbalances of power at issue also, but power’s convolutions are less simple than some would have them. The image of an ‘ethnographic gaze’ dominating ‘the Other’ in a vast panopticon obscures the way that, for instance, Ethiopia’s own ‘imperial gaze’ presents an unwary world with ‘simple beings of nature who populate the fringes of empire’ (James, p. 99). A certain edge is given to James’s essay by the fact these are ‘her’ people being fantasized over—and, as it happens, displaced or murdered. Not everywhere is so grim. Yet the real position of those we study is often lost to the view of what passes as the academic

centre: flattening people into 'otherness' is indeed 'empowering them only to exist in terms of their author's sense of self' (Hobart, p. 311). Anthropologists are not so powerful as to make that interesting. Yet precisely at the time when the complexity of our position has been made obvious and the question of distance made problematic, anthropology has seen a move to replace the analysis of power with what can only be called mock-politics.

Access to a system still dominated by America and by spoken English offers vast rewards. We control rather little of this, though we operate with reference to quite a lot of it, and we should thus be careful in what way we generalize or elect not to. The mere fact of fieldwork is educational: 'In an absolute monarchy, or in a modern totalitarian state, investigative methods are rarely open to the...ethnographer who is not actually working for the state' (James, p. 131). But all states have acquired what were once totalitarian features (nowhere can one travel without a passport). We are all bound up in collusions that centre on the bombast of nation-states and on the flow of money. If there is one conspicuous case of 'localization' (Fardon) or 'the problem of place' (Appadurai), it must surely be that of states in a world economy, which, oddly, is little discussed here.

The space of the world filled up alarmingly as evolutionism and diffusionism tried to make of that world a coherent story; and, as Lenin argued memorably enough, the space was divided by colonial powers before ever they found for it local uses. Many of anthropology's 'areas' date from then. The affinity of functionalism with the later colonial setting, or of culture-history with America of the period, needs no rehearsing; nor yet does the invention of local units such as African 'tribes'. The transformation of imperial districts into nations that had seemingly always been there has been well analysed (e.g. Anderson 1983), as too might be the dispersal of such identities, each comparable to the others, in what became after the Second World War a world economy: not structuralism itself, but its nostalgia for 'the primitive' found a place in this, at the end of a process that had started with the primitives being found. (Lévi-Strauss's fascination with Rousseau was hardly whimsical.) But control of space locates labour in particular places (Harvey 1989). The homogeneity some predicted has not occurred, at least not in the form expected. The latest episode of time-space compression (Harvey's phrase) has been spectacular, and several markets approximate the instantaneous pan-global money market; but the crisis of representation provoked has been accompanied also by the prominence of identities less attached to place, or attached less obviously; those separate 'cultures' have in some cases now collapsed inward to the point where, in popular usage, not a state but an individual can claim to be 'multi-cultural'. No wonder, perhaps, that writing, for a while, seemed easier to deal with than culture, and that 'writing culture' re-established a feeling of control and distance.

Parts, though only parts, of the social field now approximate to homogeneous space of the kind in which geographers' models work. Difference is then produced, not found, in a manner reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss's world, where elements are recombined 'not so much...in a spirit of imitation but rather to allow

small but numerous communities to express their different originalities...' (Lévi-Strauss, 1969: 8). Across much of the world the same mythic representations are common property, and *bricolage* seems a matter less of creative tinkering than of differences in something like audience response. At that point, and only then, does it seem to us odd that 'culture' is conceived as something local and that 'at least since the latter part of the nineteenth century, anthropological theory has always been based on going *somewhere*, preferably somewhere geographically, morally and socially distant from the theoretical and cultural metropolis of the anthropologist' (Appadurai 1986: 356-7; original emphasis). Appadurai's own response has been a journal called *Public Culture*,¹⁶ concentrating on precisely those 'transnational' facts and images that are hard to locate spatially, though 'decontextualization' (Appadurai, 1986: 359) remains a problem few contributors have faced satisfactorily.

These are subjects on which Appadurai is suggestive but where *Localizing Strategies* rather fails to fulfil its title's promise. What are these localizing strategies (if 'strategy' is the right word)? How are 'areas' established, and why have they appeared so real? Why, also, most importantly, has the question only surfaced now? The brute facticity of ethnographic regions has in some respects (though only some) been eroded since the Second World War by mass migration and by changes, again, in who reads what.

The 'ownership' of ideas has become (always was, perhaps) problematic, and the status of pan-national intellectual interests deserves careful study—so too does the status of pan-national intellectuals, which in some degree is what we are, engrossed with a world whose centres deny their presence.¹⁷ Instead, there is usually the kind of muddle one sees on such course-flyers as one for 'Comparative Literature 790: Third World Literature and Literary Theory', at the University of Michigan in 1988:

literary theory has been challenged in the last ten years by scholars coming from 'Third World' countries (Fernandez Retamar, Said, Spivak, Christian)...; what kinds of research programs and teaching goals [should we] envision.... If the essence of literature is called into question, what is left to compare?

And so on in familiar style. But Said, for one, is about as much a 'Third-World author' as Isaiah Berlin (rather less so, if anything). The rhetoric makes sense in a setting of pluralist politics where there is mileage to be had from 'ethnic' claims, but that sense is scarcely analytical. One may sympathize with Said's politics

16. Published since 1988 by the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

17. Recent 'critical' language has been oddly weak for discussing this. If, for example, Tambiah and Obeyesekere happen both to be Sinhalese by birth and both are noted anthropologists, one cannot then say of Sri Lanka that 'the Other perhaps more than the foreign anthropologist has had a voice in the orientation of research' (Kapferer, p. 281)—if one knows who these people are, they cannot be faceless.

(heaven knows, what upset him is real enough) and admire his literary criticism, but not, I think, elide them in this latter-day Negritude. More to the point than ethnic claims would be where we all work and in what connections, which is something anthropologists might place on their new agendas.

Though imitated by the *Guardian* newspaper, the language of pluralism will lack the same power in this country until Europe becomes more federal. In the wider world, however, something like it has been prominent for many years (see Fardon 1987) and does much to constitute our unthought objects of interest. Like nations, we see it discussed too little here. Instead, the hegemonic discourses dealt with in the Fardon volume are mainly the older ones, which seem more obviously Eurocentric: under British rule, caste in India came in fact to be something like Westerners thought it was (Burghart, p. 263); in Indonesia *adatrecht* meant that custom of the sort abstracted from life by anthropologists became law (Hobart, p. 316); 'liberal' models, more recently, were made dubious reality in Aboriginal 'home-land centres' (McKnight, p. 59). But the locals were by no means passive: Hocart's Singhalese assistant, Senerat Paranavitana, for instance, became an epigraphist and an important figure in Singhalese nationalism (Kapferer, p. 288)—shades of folklorists and lexicographers in Europe—a figure in a history where Hocart and caste might look to have different values.

The complicity of anthropology in these old concerns would seem less distant were they placed in their current setting, where the past has always been remodelled and a pristine 'other culture' is plainly beyond reach. McKnight comes closest, perhaps, discussing Aborigines. But papers on the Americas (particularly contemporary North America) and on work in Europe (see now, McDonald 1989) would make clearer the entanglements from which the end of colonialism does nothing at all to free us. Nothing could, of course; nothing should. But the context of anthropology needs more obvious comment than it seemed to previously.

Us and Them and the Dreaded Other

Schwab's *Oriental Renaissance* (1984) remains, so far as I know, the only work to explore at all fully a mutation that set 'the East' (primarily India) at the centre of Western thought and set everyone from Goethe onward learning 'Eastern' languages for a meaning thought missing from Europe's history. By now it is a commonplace what role timefulness played in this process—and in modernist literature also: it is in *The Magic Mountain*, after all, not a linguist's tome, that one finds the timeless sanatorium, removed from the world, described as having 'too much of Asia' in it. More generally, the great works of modernist writing can all be seen as responding to a sense that time in the West was somehow filling up and lives were becoming disciplined by a common time in which we lived willy-nilly:

hence a search for sense outside time—in the east, among the primitives, in myth, the unconscious, and, perhaps not least, the ethnographic present.¹⁸ But the subjects of these dreams were busy dreaming also, often in the terms despaired of: ‘European Australians...are trying to replace history with myth, while the Aborigines...have taken up history to replace their lost mythology. But then, who taught them history?’ (McKnight, p. 44). The brutality of the Australian case is not in doubt—its sheer contemporaneity is unsettling also, but the product is of a kind that recurs very widely and has done so for at least two centuries. By comparison, anthropologists are late-comers, not autonomous. Our indecision over how to get on with academic historians denotes the larger context within which, historicize as we may, we are always slightly out of place.

History as an ideology has spread, with sometimes unsettling results. Despite some feebleness in the West itself (whereby, for instance, would-be radical ‘post-modernists’ and Francis Fukuyama woke up in the same bed), the world at large has rather taken to history. No nation lacks one of its own, no matter how contrived, and nations conceive their relations with each other in historical terms: the very language of ‘development’, for instance, presumes a unitary chronology. This too is unevenly distributed. If the cry in studies of the erstwhile orient has been to historicize everything (‘timeless’ is a fierce term of disapproval), then where history is the dominant means of self-definition, as usually it is with nation-states, it throws up its complement.¹⁹ Anthropologists may fear they have treated ‘Eskimo culture’, for instance, as too timeless, but ‘the notion of a shared contemporary culture that derives directly from tradition is also the image of themselves that the Eskimos prefer to project to national government to support their claims for particular rights’ (Riches, p. 73). Woe betide the non-Eskimo (non-Inuit?) who dares historicize the claim. Ethnography cannot please everyone, but what it can do, at the risk of losing ‘market share’, is demystify what is said by whom. It no longer has much option. The metropolis and the periphery, if they were ever separate, are now practical parts of each other’s fantasy,²⁰ and historicity is increasingly played off not against the orient but against the motif of ‘indigenous peoples’ and of course ethnicity: merely to explain the details is to

18. For a useful overview of the famous novels, see Quinones 1985. Ardener’s suggestion (1989: 202) that Malinowski’s ethnography be viewed in the same light seems not to have won wide support; but there is indeed a sense in which Trobriand ethnography is comparable with Dublin on Bloomday.

19. Certain older oppositions are reworked in curious terms. Note how many anthropologists (periphery) are rushing to write linear, narrative histories, as if all the world should sound like Victorian England; while historians of Europe (centre) now write in the ethnographic present as if France, let us say, were colonial Africa.

20. Centre and periphery are now spatial versions of something more general—marginality, which may be more or less imposed or contrived. For a darkly amusing picture of the culture game played for cash prizes by ‘Native Americans’ and their neighbours, see Clifton 1990.

undermine someone's claims, if only those of the weekend supplements, and we are forced to 'strategize' with care.

Mere physical distance no longer counts for much. The Penan, once known, if at all, for their system of naming, have this year been on a world tour, the subject of congressional hearings, and are all but protégés of The Grateful Dead. To separate their claims from those of the *soi-disant* 'Celts' of Brittany (McDonald 1989)—polytechnic lecturers almost to the last man and woman—requires appeal to more than 'other cultures'. The complexities are real, the need to deal with them pressing. The current fashion for speaking of 'the Other' and homogenizing politics could not, on grounds of either timing or substance, be much worse judged—and the bland appeal to 'culture' more so. Essentialism is the last thing we need at present.

Few contributors to Fardon's volume miss the point that our terms of art are political capital, and that what were once local rhetorics are convoluted throughout much of what we read. The potential ironies (symptomatically, an overworked word) are endless. The convolution itself is evident from the fact that one can now, without care for time or space, quote Street quoting Akbar Ahmed quoting Malinowski: 'When I started fieldwork...the stage was set and waiting. I could therefore "put aside the camera, note-book and pencil" and "plunge into the imponderabilia of actual life...to grasp the native's point of view"' (p. 235). What did the natives call him, one wonders? 'Sir'? For Ahmed is a man of more weight in the world than most of us, district officer of North-West Frontier Province, scion of an important family, a dominant figure in Pakistani ethnology and, one gathers from those who work in those parts, a gatekeeping figure of some importance. He comes to dominate, quite oddly, Brian Street's own ponderously written piece on 'Orientalist discourses' (does the phrase look a little frowsty?) in the Persianate half of the Middle East. Street's essay turns out back to front. In heavily didactic tones, Street chastises Richard Tapper for chastising Akbar Ahmed, and himself ends up, quite unwittingly, casting Ahmed as an old-style 'native'—the kind of person whose utterances are data, not conversation. A lot of this has been going on.

The problem is compounded, if not produced, by 'metropolitan' self-delusion. Ahmed has his view of Pakhtun or Pathan ethnography, and Tapper has his reservations:

But this in an unequal contest in which to engage. Whatever power Ahmed may have or assert in his own contact with the western academic world, he cannot reverse the power structure and undermine the academic culture on the basis of the indigenous one.... Ahmed simply runs the risk of alienating his erstwhile tutors. (Street, p. 253)

Scary stuff on the Northwest Frontier that, upsetting one's old tutor. To delude ourselves that SOAS is a power at all comparable to the Pakistani government is scarcely helpful: if Tapper 'denigrates' Ahmed 'with all the authority of the metropolitan culture' (p. 254), we have to be realistic about what

that authority now amounts to, how this culture works and where SOAS fits into it. The appeal of 'Islamic anthropology' to British publishers would be worth analysis, as too would the relation between access to the British press and one's standing as an intellectual elsewhere, a relation that presumably works both ways and does much to define anthropology's value for all concerned. Ahmed's own vast list of newspaper pieces would make a fascinating study. We might even, unexciting though it is, decide on the merits of Tapper's and Ahmed's arguments. Academics, however, still restlessly dream of power: 'The academic...makes a different but no less telling contribution than the politician to the construction of Middle Eastern society as alien' (p. 240). And the opposite sex find us irresistible.²¹

To deal with complexities honestly (to 'speak from one's position', as the Marxists used once to say) requires a sense of proportion. When the author to whom James responds 'rubbish' comes floating across one's sights—'in order to turn myself into one of the Nuer people I took off all my clothes' (quoted, p. 124)—one has to be allowed a laugh. The Nuer too must be given space for their response, be it outrage, bafflement or a laugh of their own. Area ethnography leaves that space to a surprising degree, if only because it is open to detailed reworking. The idea of 'humankind' leaves less space. Culture, in the sense of something shared in their bones by those we write about, leaves less again.

21. This hubris seemed laughable to start with. The experience of the Gulf war since then should have rubbed academics' noses in how marginal they are to collective fantasy as well as (which they knew already) to the forms of power. A colleague who wrote an excellent book on pre-invasion Kuwaiti politics was typical: one phone call from the media to know how many wives Shaykh Jabir had, and an invitation to appear on 'Geraldo'—which, wisely, she declined.

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