

Orientations: Anthropology as a Practice of Theory

Anthropology: A critique of common sense

Social and cultural anthropology is “the study of common sense.” Yet common sense is, anthropologically speaking, seriously mis-named: it is neither common to all cultures, nor is any version of it particularly sensible from the perspective of anyone outside its particular cultural context. It is the socially acceptable rendition of culture, and is thus as variable as are both cultural forms and social rules – those twin axes that define the formal objects of anthropological theory. Whether viewed as “self-evidence” (Douglas 1975: 276–318) or as “obviousness,” common sense – the everyday understanding of how the world works – turns out to be extraordinarily diverse, maddeningly inconsistent, and highly resistant to skepticism of any kind. It is embedded in both sensory experience and practical politics – powerful realities that constrain and shape access to knowledge. How do we know that human beings have really landed on the moon? We are (usually) convinced of it – but how do we know that our conviction does not rest on some misplaced confidence in the sources of our information? If we have reason to doubt that others are entirely successful in making sense of the world, how do we know – given that we cannot easily step outside our own frame of reference – that we are doing any better?

To be sure, this challenge to what we might call scientific and rational credulity was not what the earliest anthropologists (in any professionally recognizable sense) had in mind. To the contrary, they were convinced of their own-cultural superiority to the people they studied, and would have reacted with astonishment to any suggestion that science could be studied in the same way as “magic.” They did not see that distinction as itself symbolic; they thought it was rational, literal, and real. But their thinking was no less mired in the structures and circumstances of colonial domination than were those of the colonized peoples they studied, although their angle of perspective was necessarily different – so that it is hardly surprising that they reached different conclusions, whether or not these had any empirical validity. In recognizing this embarrassing ancestry for our field, I want to suggest more than an intellectual exercise

in imagination or atonement for collective past sins. I want to suggest that anthropology has learned as much – and can therefore teach as much – by attention to its mistakes as by the celebration of its achievements. That is, after all, what we urge students of anthropology to do in the field – so much so that the responses to solecisms and poor judgement can often be more informative than responses to the most carefully crafted interview protocol. The achievements are largely matters of factual recording (and even these are often in dispute); but the social character of the most abstract theory has begun to be much more apparent to us, and, paradoxically, this awareness of entailment has allowed us to be much more rigorously comparative than ever before – to see our own worldview, with anthropology its instrument and its expression, in the same terms as we view those distant others on whom we have for so long fixed our gaze. So why not study science as an ethnographic object?

Much recent anthropological work has indeed inspected the claims of modern technology, politics, and science. Notably, the entire field of medical anthropology (see especially Kleinman 1995) has challenged the claims of a crass scientism that – as Nicholas Thomas observes in a somewhat different context – has failed to keep pace with developments in science itself. There has clearly been an enormous expansion of the discipline's topical range since the Victorians' preoccupation with what they called savage societies. That expansion, moreover, entails much more than a mere broadening of factual or even theoretical horizons. It is a rearrangement of the very principles of intellectual perspective.

Anthropology, a discipline that has thus developed an ironic sense of its own social and cultural context, is particularly well equipped to challenge the separation of modernity from tradition and rationality from superstition – perhaps, ironically, in part because it played an enormously influential role in the creation of this antinomy. The constant exposure of anthropologists in the field to the cultural specificity of their own backgrounds undoubtedly played an important part in generating a sense of – and discomfort with – the cultural vainglory of the centres of world power. Indeed, a famous spoof by Horace Miner (1956), an article in which he analysed the curious body rituals of the “Nacirema” (a well-known tribal group, spelled backwards), makes fun of scholars' formal way of theorizing everyday matters. Instead of merely poking fun at the ease with which scholars are seduced by the vanity of expertise, however, Miner raised a serious question of epistemology: why should the supposed rationality of western lifestyles escape the sardonic eye of the anthropologist? The question is serious because it is fundamentally political, and the evidence for this confronts anthropologists in the field at every turn. A study (Ferreira 1997) of Amazonian responses to Western-imposed mathematical conventions, for example, shows that the denial of natives' cognitive capacities may be an integral part of their exploitation and even extirpation by the local agents of international commercial interests. Anthropology is often about misunderstandings, including anthropologists' own misunderstandings, because these are usually the outcome of the mutual incommensurability of different notions of common sense – our object of study.

Yet the task becomes correspondingly more difficult as the politics and worldview under study move closer not only to home but to the centers of effective power. Anthropology entails the unveiling of intimate practices that lie behind rhetorical protestations of eternal truth, ranging from “that’s always been our custom”, in almost every village and tribal society studied by the anthropologists of the past, to the evocation of science and logic by every modern political elite (see, e.g., Balslem 1993; Zabusky 1995). We should not be surprised if those whose authority may be compromised by such revelations do not take too kindly to becoming the subjects of anthropological research. Calling themselves modern, they have claimed above all to have achieved a rationality capable of transcending cultural boundaries (see Tambiah 1990). They have characterized other societies as pre-modern, and have attributed to these a lack of specialization in domains requiring mental activity. Thus, the political was held to be inextricably embedded in kinship and more generally in the social fabric of such societies. In the same way, art was not distinguished from craft or from ritual production; economic life was sustained by social reciprocities and belief systems; and science could not emerge as an autonomous field because human beings had not yet found efficient ways of disentangling the practical from the religious (or the superstitious, as this domain was sometimes called, presupposing a besetting incapacity to separate cosmological belief from pure philosophy on the one hand and practical knowledge on the other). Thus, anthropology’s main task was seen as the study of domains of the social – politics, economics, kinship, religion, aesthetics, and so on – in those societies the members of which had not learned to make such abstract distinctions. Long after the demise of evolutionism as the dominant theory of society and culture, this evolutionist assumption sustained the categories of modernity and tradition as the basis for teaching anthropology, and hence also the illusion that societies that had announced themselves to be modern and advanced had somehow managed to rise above the inability to conceptualize the abstract and so had succeeded in rationalizing the social through the specialization of tasks.

Yet such assumptions could not be long sustained. They quickly clashed with the direct experience of field research, as Thomas observes: long immersion among the populations towards which such condescension was directed undermined the sense of absolute superiority and empirically discredited basic presuppositions. Indeed, as Stocking (1995: 123, 292) has noted, the turn to fieldwork – even before Malinowski – was crucial in undermining evolutionist perspectives even though their organizing framework was to prove disturbingly persistent: knowing those about whom one writes as neighbors and friends makes lofty ideas about the hierarchy of cultures both untenable and distasteful. Increasingly anthropologists began to apply at home what they had found helpful in supposedly simple societies. Mary Douglas (1966), in arguing for a cultural and social definition of dirt against a purely biochemical one, profoundly challenged the hygiene-centered preoccupations of European and North American societies that Miner had so mercilessly satirized. Marc Abélès perceives politics in modern Europe, at least in part, as a resuscitation of local-level

values and relations, to the interpretation of which the anthropologist's grassroots perspective affords especially immediate access.

Yet we should not expect too great a role for anthropology in the future: that "the foreign relativizes the familiar" is less useful and startling today, when the knowledge that anthropologists produce is immediately open to criticism by those about whom it is produced as they come to share an increasingly large range of communications technology with us. Nevertheless, this assessment might itself be cause for optimism about the potential for anthropology to contribute usefully to current social and political criticism. Hand-wringing about the crisis of representation should not obscure the fact that some of the more considered critiques themselves generated important new insights and departures. Even the disillusionment with fieldwork that began to appear in the 1960s – and especially with its claims to theoretically objective rigor – had the effect of strengthening this rejection of the radical separation between the observer and the observed and so created more, not less, empirically grounded forms of knowledge.

It is especially telling that, as Néstor García Canclini has emphasized, the rapid growth of urban social forms has dealt a decisive blow to that separation between observer and observed (and to the exclusive focus of some of the more traditional or "exoticizing" forms of anthropology on "salvage" work). As he points out, anthropologists are themselves subject to most of the forces that affect the urban populations they study. By the same token, however, the distinction between the urban and the rural, which (in the binary form in which it is often articulated) is to some extent simply an artefact of the history of anthropology itself, is also now increasingly difficult to sustain. Such insights underscore the importance of being fully aware of the discipline's historical entailments. This more fluid relationship with our subject-matter emerges as a result of increasingly reflexive approaches. As a basic orientation in anthropology, it is both analytically more useful and historically more responsible than rejecting the whole enterprise as fatally and irremediably flawed either by observer "contamination" (a symbolic construct found with surprising frequency in writings claimed as scientific) or by its indisputably hegemonic past (which it shares with the entire range of academic disciplines). Both the pragmatic and the rejectionist responses can certainly be found in the ethnographic literature, sometimes curiously conjoined in a single work. In such contradictory moments, in fact, we can sometimes see the first stirrings of a more flexible approach to the categorical confusions that, as Néstor García Canclini observes, proliferate in the complexity of urban life.

Take, for example, two roughly contemporaneous studies of Moroccan society, both of which carry introspection to lengths that many have found to be excessive. Against the grim rejectionism of Kevin Dwyer's *Moroccan Dialogues* (1982), a work in which a single ethnographer-informant relationship is made to do the work of destabilizing a whole discipline, Paul Rabinow's distinctly nihilistic *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977) makes a very different case: its contribution to current anthropological thought comes less through the author's disgust with traditional method (or rather with the

lack of it) than through his perceptive recognition that the jaded ex-colonialist French *hôte* was at least as good a subject for ethnographic investigation as the romantic Berber denizens of the *kasbah* and the *suq*. Such moves help to make the “unmarked” carriers of modernity both visible and interesting and to dismantle their rhetoric of cultural neutrality. Even as some European critics, for example, assail anthropologists for daring to study Europeans themselves on the same terms as exotic savages, thereby exposing a cultural hierarchy that is indeed worth studying in its own cultural and social context, the recent, rapid intensification of this focus on “the West” has also helped to dissolve much of the residue of anthropology’s own embarrassingly racist origins. Fortunately, the absence of so-called Western societies from the roster of generally acknowledged ethnographic sites, a situation that implicitly represented such societies as transcending culture itself, is now being trenchantly redressed.

In Rabinow’s book, moreover, we see one of the most perverse strengths of anthropology: that its capacity for even quite destructive self-examination has provided a pedagogical tool of considerable value. Furthermore, anthropology’s now skeptical view of rationalism offers a healthy corrective to the more universalistic assumptions common in other social-science disciplines, while its persistent localism provides a strong vaccine against universalizing the particularistic values of cultures that happen to be politically dominant. Whenever the end of anthropology has been proclaimed from within there has been a renewal of both external interest and internal theoretical energy. This, I suggest, is because anthropology provides a unique critical and empirical space in which to examine the universalistic claims of common sense – including the common sense of Western social theory.

While I am cautious about the risk of inflated ideas about what the discipline can do for the world at large, I would also argue that – at least in the classroom, hardly an unimportant place, but also in all the other arenas of opinion formation to which anthropologists have access from time to time – there is great value in the destabilization of received ideas both through the inspection of cultural alternatives and through the exposure of the weaknesses that seem to inhere in all our attempts to analyze various cultural worlds including our own. We need such a counterweight to the increasingly bureaucratic homogenization of the forms of knowledge.

I would argue, furthermore, that the characteristic stance of this discipline has always been its proclivity for taking marginal communities and using that marginality to ask questions about the centers of power. Indeed, some of the most exciting ethnographic studies are those which challenge the homogenizing rhetoric of nation-states. Recent work on Indonesia – a country of riotous variety – makes the point with especially dramatic force, both topically and conceptually (Bowen 1993; George 1996; Steedly 1993; Tsing 1993). But even in the world of European power, there are marginal spaces that complicate the representation of nationhood, culture, and society in ways that challenge long-cherished assumptions within the discipline (see Argyrou 1996a, 1997 on Cyprus; Herzfeld 1987 on Greece).

Field research, often in a tension-laden collaboration with respectably grand theory, has always been the cornerstone of anthropology. It generates an intimacy of focus – changing ways of framing ethnographic fieldwork make the more spatial image of a bounded community somewhat out-dated – that permits the recognition of indeterminacy in social relations. This is an empirical concern that too easily escapes the broader view but that nonetheless has enormous consequences for the larger picture (in the prediction of electoral patterns, for example, where isolated communities with very specific proclivities may hold the casting vote in a tight race). The nature of ethnographic research, Nicholas Thomas has argued, may now be changing, in response to new ways of organizing social and cultural life. Indeed, there is a pragmatically sensible shift from insistence on the local focus of ethnography – a tiny unit often situated within an equally arbitrary “culture area” and defined by the supposed peculiarities of that area – and toward new efforts at finding the intimacy necessary to successful fieldwork in large cities, electronic encounters, offices and laboratories, on buses and trains (see Gupta and Ferguson, eds., 1997; Herzfeld 1997a).

Yet this shift does not invalidate the anthropological preference for microscopic analysis. Curiously enough, in fact, the huge increase in scale of global interaction has intensified rather than attenuated the need for such an intimate perspective, as Thomas notes, and as we shall see particularly in the chapter on Media. If anthropologists still want to be “participant observers,” hiding in villages while the villagers themselves are busily commuting (see Deltou 1995), tracking old friends through the communications superhighway, or refusing to engage with the myriad national and international agencies that assist and confound people’s everyday lives, will not suffice.

History and the Myth of Theoretical Origins

Most summaries of anthropology start with an account of its history, or at least place that history before any discussion of such contemporary themes as that of reflexivity. My thought in partially reversing that convention here is to highlight, as an example of what I am describing, the tendency to see the growth of the discipline as one of unilinear progress – in other words, as an example of one of the discipline’s earliest master narratives, that of evolutionism (sometimes also known as social Darwinism or survivalism). It also makes it easier to emphasize a related point: that, far from being arranged in a tidy sequence beginning at some mythical point of origin, the “stages” of anthropological thought often overlap, confound the usual predictions of their order of appearance, and reappear as embarrassing anachronisms amidst supposedly progressive theoretical developments. Thus, for example, the seemingly very “modern” and postcolonial insight that key analytic categories such as kinship and marriage may not be as universally applicable as we had once imagined is anticipated in the writings of explorers who had wrestled practically with the inadequacies of these categories in the field a century

ago, notably in Australia (see Stocking 1995: 26). Conversely, however, some key ideas associated with the evolutionism of Victorian Britain and the functionalist modes of explanation systematized by Malinowski in the 1920s often reappear in the structuralism of the 1960s and even in its successors, including the reflexive historiography of the 1990s. Let me elaborate on this by briefly commenting on the characteristic instance of Lévi-Strauss' structuralism.

Among his many contributions to anthropological theory, Claude Lévi-Strauss advanced the view that myth was "a machine for the suppression of time" and that it had the effect of concealing the contradictions raised by the very existence of social life (see discussion and further references in Leach 1970: 57–8, 112–19). Thus, for example, society prohibits incest, but how to explain reproduction except through a primal act of incest? (By extension, we might say that the birth of a new nation – an entity that characteristically lays claim to pure origins – must presuppose an act of cultural or even genetic miscegenation. And indeed Lévi-Strauss' views on myths of origin are especially apposite for the analysis of nationalistic histories.) How different is this from Malinowski's (1948) celebrated definition of myth as a "charter" for society? Or again, if incest taboos reflect the importance of maintaining clear categorical distinctions between insiders and outsiders and so enable each society to reproduce itself by marrying out (exogamy), how far does this escape the teleological implication – typical of most forms of functionalism – that such is the goal of rules prohibiting incest?

The sobering evidence of such intellectual recidivism has an important corollary. Once we see theories as expressions of a social and political orientation and as heuristic devices for exploring social reality, rather than as the instruments of pure intellect, the theories become visible in hitherto unsuspected places. We begin to realize, in other words, that informants are themselves engaged in theoretical practices – not, for the most part, in the sense of a professional engagement, but through the performance of directly comparable intellectual operations. Lévi-Strauss's (1966) celebrated distinction between "cold" and "hot" societies thus turns out to be one of scale rather than of kind.

It is one thing to recognize informants as producers of abstract social knowledge, but, as Thomas remarks, quite another to use it as the basis of our own theoretical understanding. Nevertheless, the increasing porosity of the contemporary world means that we shall be ever more dependent on our informants' intellectual tolerance and will therefore, willy-nilly, find ourselves doing just that. For, to an increasing degree, they "read what we write" (Brettell, ed., 1993). Moreover, they, too, write, and some of them write anthropology. This makes their ratiocination more perceptible (see especially Reed-Danahay 1997 [ed.]), although it also perhaps means that the domination of "modern" writing systems might occlude other modes of reasoning. The rise of a few dominant languages and ways of representing them is a development that would limit rather than expand our intellectual possibilities.

The extension of "sense" from "common sense" to "the sensorium" and the concomitant rejection of an a priori commitment to the Cartesian separation of mind from body is vital to expanding our capacity to appreciate the practical

theorizing of social actors (M. Jackson 1989). (As with some of the complex kinship systems studied by early anthropologists, whether we realize it or not it is our own intellectual incapacity that is at issue.) Insights into those areas of the sensorium that resist reduction to verbal description are challenges to our capacity to suspend disbelief but, for that very reason, they demand a less solipsistic response than either the kind of objectivism that only accepts as significant the limited compass of understanding already circumscribed by the values of one culture (see Classen 1993a), or the surprisingly parallel self-indulgence of writing about culture from the safety of pure introspection. The latter is indeed a return to Victorian “armchair anthropology” in the name of a “post-modern” equivalent such as cultural studies.

The dearth of older studies of the sensory is especially surprising when one considers that evolutionists propounded at an early date the view that human beings became progressively less dependent on physical sensation as the life of the active mind took over. Yet these self-satisfied Victorians were, for example, deeply interested in ritual – one of the discipline’s hardest perennials. As Don Handelman remarks, ritual may engage all the senses to an extent not usually realized in (modern forms of) spectacle. Yet there has not until recently been much anthropological curiosity about the role of senses other than the visual and the auditory in ritual practices, and only rather modest attempts have been made to analyse these aspects as anything more than appendages to the main business of ritual action.

Raising questions about such matters reveals the limits of purely verbal channels of enquiry, and consequently poses a productive challenge to all the social sciences, especially those in which there is some recognition of social actors’ own theoretical capacities. Don Handelman has raised the issue of theory that is implicit in ritual, yet he argues that we then construct a different theoretical framework that allows us to disembody the indigenous theory from its manifestations as ritual. Well and good – but this demands a dramatic increase in our ability both to record and to analyze those nonverbal semiotics through which the actors’ conceptual assumptions and insights are expressed, manipulated, and, to use Handelman’s terminology, transformed. For it is at least conceivable that in transforming the condition of a group or an individual, the performance of a ritual may also transform the way in which its underlying assumptions are perceived or conceptualized – something of the sort is presupposed in the idea that rituals, often associated with the reproduction of systems of power, may also serve as vehicles of change.

Here it seems especially vital to avoid the common error of assuming that all meaning can be rendered accurately in linguistic form. Much of what passes for translation should more accurately be called exegesis. Paradoxically this awareness of the limits of language entails a considerable command of the language of the culture in which one is working. It is crucial to be able to identify irony, to recognize allusion (sometimes to politically significant shifts in language use), and to go beyond simplistic assumptions that a language that appears grounded in social experience is “less” capable of carrying abstract meaning than one’s own (see Labov 1972).

So, too, is a willingness to recognize that informants' ideas about meaning may not correspond to the verbocentric assumptions usually held by western intellectuals. In my own work in a rural Cretan community, for example, I have found that the inhabitants' ability to decode the semiotics of their own discourse as well as that of the encompassing bureaucratic nation-state is fueled by an acute sense of political marginality. Other examples are given in this book. Local usage in some societies appears to conflate linguistic meaning with casual observations that something "matters" (or "is meaningful," as we might say). But if such views do reflect local usage, perhaps they can also do something to loosen the hold that the language-centered model of meaning has over our intellectualist imagination.

The idea of illiterate village theorists is not especially astounding when one considers that these people must contend with enormous social complexities. Their situation, enmeshed in sometimes mutually discordant allegiances to entities larger than the local community, requires adroit decoding skills as a matter of sheer political survival. As a result, informants may display an exegetical virtuosity and a conceptual eclecticism that would, in a professional anthropologist, appear as signs of inconsistency, but in the local context simply display the pragmatic deployment of theory at its most varied. One can find the equivalent of functionalists, evolutionists, and even structuralists among one's informants: types of explanation respond to the needs of the situation. This becomes an even more complex issue when dealing with populations whose reading has been, perhaps unbeknownst to them, suffused with the vocabulary of past anthropologies – and that includes an increasing share of the world's populations. Local explanations of "custom" are frequently legitimated with a heavy dose of "scientific" evolutionism, for example – and, since theory often draws on currently popular notions, it is empirically unsound in such cases to treat popular discourse and anthropological theory as two wholly separate domains. Only a historical account of the relationship between them makes it possible to disentangle them for analytic purposes.

This is why I would welcome a disciplinary history that paid far greater attention than was hitherto acceptable to the role our informants play in the development of our ideas. For there is some evidence for this role. In the 1960s, for example, a major dispute pitted the structuralists (as "alliance theorists") against structural-functionalists (as "descent theorists") in the explanation of kinship. It turns out that – with a few, albeit notable, exceptions – most of the former had worked in South America and South East Asia, while the majority of the latter had conducted their research in Africa and the Middle East. Could this not be the result of the impact of local traditions of exegesis on the thinking of anthropologists? Ethnographic reports are replete with intimations of local theorizing; an early, and famous, example is that of Evans-Pritchard's experience with Nuer who drew diagrams in the ground in order to explain the lineaments of their ideal-typical lineage structure to him (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 202). To treat these exercises as ethnographic vignettes rather than as theoretical contributions seems ungenerous by the standards of today's more reflexive ethos.

Anthropology, framed in these terms, is perhaps unusual among the social sciences in the degree to which its practitioners acknowledge the collapse of the once axiomatic separation of theorizing scholar and ethnographic “subject.” Does this mean that their models are fatally flawed? On the contrary, I suggest, their claims to intellectual rigor are strengthened by such acknowledgements of intellectual debt – acknowledgements that simultaneously undercut the arbitrariness of the scientific (as opposed to scientific) insistence on perfect replicability and the equally self-referential nihilism towards which some – but not all – forms of postmodernism threaten to propel the discipline.

Among the latter, the assessments of ethnography in *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, eds., 1986) have been especially and appropriately criticized by feminists (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen 1987–8; Behar and Gordon, eds., 1995). Especially in the light of such criticisms from those who might have been expected to be sympathetic, it would be easy to dismiss the postmodern trend as simply another exploitative discourse. But that would be to repeat, yet again, the offense that is most commonly laid at its door. In fact, however, these instances of what Don Robotham has called “moderate” postmodernism have served as provocations to expand the space of ethnographic investigation, thereby, I would argue, rendering it more rather than less empirical – a judgment with which extremists of both the positivist and the postmodern persuasions would probably be equally unhappy.

But can a discipline so often forced to examine itself in this way contribute anything to human understanding, or are its internal squabbles simply too distracting or paralyzing? Certainly some of them seem dangerously silly. But the available evidence suggests that in fact the result has been an increase in ethnographic work, held to a higher standard of both scientific (in the most general sense) and moral accountability. If that is so, there are at least two major gains to be discussed: first, in the realization of the intellectual riches that scholars’ increased humility might make generally available, and, second, and by extension, in the pedagogical task of fighting racism and other pernicious essentialisms in a world that seems increasingly inclined to return to them.

Anthropology and the Politics of Identity

The emphasis on agency has led to a partial dissolution of the once clear-cut divisions among anthropological topics, defined in terms of institutional significance (kinship, politics, religion, economics and so on). Kinship, for example, today enjoys a more organic entailment in other areas of research. Whether as a dimension of the relationship between gender and state power (e.g., Borneman 1992; Yanagisako and Delaney, eds., 1995) or as the guiding

metaphor of nationalism, in losing its former autonomy it has gained a pervasive sociocultural significance far in excess of what its erstwhile prominence allowed it. Today, as we shall see, it may be sorely in need of reframing; but it remains surprisingly central.

Ethnicity, too, has achieved a new ubiquity. The concept itself has come in for a good deal of deconstruction, but it dies hard. Although anthropologists have contributed massively to its analysis, moreover, they have been especially alive to its political adoption by incipient nationalisms (e.g., J. Jackson 1995). It therefore constitutes an especially clear illustration of the difficulty of analytically separating the anthropological enterprise from its object of study – a difficulty that (as I am arguing here), far from invalidating the discipline, corresponds especially closely to the empirical realities. Indeed, it is not only the case that anthropologists increasingly find themselves repeating knowledge that local actors already possess, in a form that the locals may not find particularly revealing of new insights. That knowledge may also – to the extent that anthropological production is still taken seriously – serve to legitimize emergent identities and practices.

This situation is something of a test case for the strengths and weaknesses of a postmodern perspective. On the one hand, awareness of being in the picture offers a salutary corrective to the usual image of “cultures” as hermetically and unambiguously bounded entities – whether as physically isolated tribal communities or as industrial states severely defined (and often literally fenced in) by national borders. But it also suggests that any attempt to deny the reality of such borders for the actors themselves is indefensible, and may, as Jean Jackson (1995) in particular has noted, undercut their attempts at self-determination in the face of state brutality. It also forces scholars to confront the inevitable problem that today’s liberation of one population may bring in its train the extermination or enslavement of others. At the very least, anthropologists can sound warnings about the reality of such slippage.

In conformity with this vision of the interconnectedness of things, the discussion of ethnicity and nationalism percolates through numerous other focal themes. For example, we inspect connections among ritual, bureaucracy, nationalism, and the production of spectacle in religious and nationalist contexts – two domains that themselves exhibit revealing similarities, notably in the relationship between nationalism and myth-making. Here it may be useful to note Sara Dickey’s brief but illuminating mention of the national-character studies that relied on media as their principal source of data and that, I would add, themselves shared a long history with nationalistic folklore studies (see Cocchiara 1952; Caro Baroja 1970). Anthropology was once powerfully implicated in the nation-building and related enterprises of which its present-day practitioners are now implicated in the “constructivist” critique – to the distress of many host communities, as Argyrou (1996b), J. Jackson (1995), Thomas, and others have observed. The constructivist position not only questions present-day unities, but does so through the disaggregation of a nominally unified past. In particular, it entails questioning the idea of a single point of

departure that we meet in both myths of origin and nationalistic histories, and this may pose deeply serious threats to new entities that have not yet adequately covered their heterogeneous traces (perhaps including anthropology itself?): time is commonly a source of validation – a means of establishing cosmic rights of use, as it were.

Ethnicity and nationalism are thus ubiquitous themes in anthropology: they circumscribe both its intellectual agenda and its potential for meaningful political engagement. They demand of all anthropologists a willingness to consider in good faith the potential consequences of what they write and publish, placing the moral burden of responsibility – a burden that cannot be assuaged by pat ethical prescriptions – squarely on the anthropologists' shoulders. They are, in many senses, the very ground on which anthropology as a discipline must make its case – whether as the object of its study, the basis for historical reflection and reassessment, or the political context for action.

In this project I have therefore, consistently with the theme of anthropology as a systematic critique of notions of common sense, opted at the organizational level to emphasize instead such less “obvious” domains as the senses, modernities, and media; but there is no cause for concern, for the “obvious” themes demonstrate their hardiness by reappearing in new guises within the framework adopted here. Such rearrangements are not merely cosmetic, nor merely accidental: they are intentionally designed to encourage theoretical reassessment as well.

One important area on which this entire project focuses quite deliberately is that of modernity – or, rather, a plethora of modernities. Two themes are central. First, there is the question of whether modernity is radically different or whether, viewed as a plurality in accordance with Don Robotham's formulation (with its attendant rejection of older and now clearly simplistic antinomies pitting subaltern against colonial perspectives), one can view “it” as a distinctive entity at all. This is methodologically important because on it depends how far we treat in the same framework such pairs as state bureaucracy and the symbolic classification of tribal rituals; moiety systems of kinship and competing legal regimes of family law and political ideology (as in pre-1989 Berlin: see Borneman 1992); and scientific rationalities and religious practice. Is Miner's *Nacirema* spoof merely an elegant joke, or does it prompt serious reflection on the extent to which we can make claims equating modernity with some universal notion of rationality? What does it mean to treat the political elites of modern industrialized societies in terms of kinship and other face-to-face idioms of identity, as Abélès recommends? And why has kinship returned so decisively to center-stage, in studies ranging from nationalism to reproductive technologies and ideologies (Strathern 1989; Ginsburg and Rapp, eds., 1996; Ginsburg 1989; Kahn 2000)? If such studies are grounded on a metaphorical use of the “archaic” term in each pair, so are the modernities that they analyze. The kinship metaphors used in nation-state construction will be especially familiar to most readers of this book.

The second question concerns the plurality of possible “modernities.” For modernity is not a universalizing trend. Thus, if its riotous variety allows plenty

of play to human agency, we may ask whether there have in fact ever been societies as conformist as those portrayed by the evolutionist and functionalist imaginations. The evidence suggests, not only that such uniformity and boundedness are gross oversimplifications, but also that the persistence of social and cultural diversity in the so-called global village of the new millennium portends an important role for an anthropology newly sensitized to agency and practice. It will be a valuable corrective to social analyses latterly co-opted by the discourses of state and supra-state power.

The theoretical turn to concepts of agency and practice (see Ortner 1984) signaled an important moment in the discipline's self-realization. At the very time when some observers – gleefully or sadly according to their own perspectives – were predicting that the crisis of ethnographic representation and the partially self-inflicted critique of anthropology would destroy its credibility, three important developments led in the opposite direction.

First, many scholars interpreted the criticisms as a challenge to deepen and broaden the purview of ethnography rather than to abandon ship; the result was a significant rise in the publication of theoretically engaged ethnography. Second, many of those who agreed with the criticisms nevertheless felt that they could be built back into the discipline's theoretical framework, thereby permitting greater sensitivity to issues that, in the final analysis, still had to do with the depth and richness of ethnographic description. Third, the rise of a text metaphor for ethnography was found to have severe limits (see, e.g., Asad 1993), yet it may be that some awareness of these was what forced discussion back to the social actors themselves – a development that counteracted the disembodied and over-generalized visions of society and culture generated by both the textualist and the positivistic extremes.

Textualism was also associated with a debilitating over-dependence on language-based models of meaning. Yet language itself provided an escape route: the realization, still too partial, that ordinary language insights – the shift from reference to use – can be applied as much to all other semiotic domains as they can to language. The new anthropological emphasis on visual media and on multisensory analysis underscores the importance of avoiding a referential view of meaning that reduces everything to pure text – the practice of anthropology included.

It is nonetheless important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater: the textual turn in anthropology, especially as pioneered by Clifford Geertz (1973a), did much to force anthropologists' attention on meaning as opposed to an objectified form, even though it did so in ways that were to prove almost as deterministic as what they had displaced. Malcolm Crick's (1976) early critique of literalism, a now neglected but fundamentally important text, can serve as a useful and well-argued introduction to these concerns. And such a critique of literalism entails recognizing that an act (verbal or otherwise) can be profoundly historical, yet in no sense reducible to the enumeration of events that we might therefore expect. History can be danced, felt, smelled, and, yes, spoken; and every act and every sensory experience is a potential carrier of links with the recent and the more distant past.

A Sense of Application

I have suggested that anthropology might provocatively be defined as the comparative study of common sense. This is an important tool to deploy against the insistent rationalism of a wide range of international agencies that seek to impose their particular renditions of common sense on societies that do not endorse those ideas, on problems to which they are ill-suited because of local values and practices, and on people who respond in unexpected ways. To some extent, of course, this is simply a remediable practical issue: it is no use sending food aid to people whose religion will not permit them to touch the gift. But in another sense it shows that a practice-oriented anthropology can and must also be a critique of practicality. In this regard, I would particularly note recent work by Arturo Escobar (1995), James Ferguson (1990), and Akhil Gupta (1998), among many others – work that does not deny the importance of various forms of aid in a world struggling to survive extreme poverty and rapid demographic expansion, but that seeks to illuminate its abuses and misuses. These features sometimes promote great suffering, as Veena Das has noted, in the name of rationality.

To the extent that ideas of the sensible are increasingly presented in global terms, we can now thus also say that anthropology may serve as a discourse of critical resistance to the conceptual and cosmological hegemony of this global common sense. Much of the work discussed in this book illustrates how anthropology can protect a critically important resource: the very possibility of questioning the universal logic of “globalization” and exposing its historically narrow and culturally parochial base by hearing other voices, is preserved through the critical investigations of anthropology. If, for example, economic rationality can be seen as the driving force behind current representations of rationality, local conceptions of economic wisdom make it clear why many of the world’s people will not be persuaded. What from the perspective of the dominant discourse looks like irrational traditionalism emerges, on closer inspection, as an alternative logic. The comparison may also coincide with evidence that state global agencies do not necessarily act in accordance with their own stated rationality, an observation that underscores the importance of maintaining a strong sense of the conceptual and social diversity that still exists in the world.

Such concerns are practical as well as academic. The isolation of the “ivory tower” from the “real world” has indeed been a remarkably significant political development, in which anthropologists (among others) have allowed a particular representation of reality to marginalize their perspectives and so to stifle their critical contribution. They can now resist this move by historicizing and contextualizing the conventional wisdoms that have gained political ascendancy in the global arena.

Thus, for example, Arturo Escobar has explicitly embraced a “poststructuralist” position, of the kind that uninformed critics particularly charge with refusing to engage with the “real world.” In point of fact, Escobar has advocated active opposition to precisely that lack of engagement – and the critics

are unlikely to be happy about that, for it is their logic that comes under fire as a result. For those concerned with the cultural and social impact of “development,” as for those who argue that environmentalist programs must be far more sensitive to cultural values in order to stand some chance of success, this is indeed a necessary move for anthropology. Interestingly, we also find a similarly activist perspective argued in areas of anthropology that in the past were usually relegated to the zone of the purely academic (notably kinship) studies, for which John Borneman insists we should seek a transformation that is both intellectually more defensible and politically more just. Even areas once thought to be the domain of pure aesthetics and thus to be socially epiphenomenal and politically insignificant, such as music, become sites of a political engagement. This makes the analytic separation of the intellectual from the political increasingly unconvincing.

All these arguments have to do with the distribution of power, and all in some sense reflect an uneasy awareness that globalization has reduced, or at least threatens to reduce, the arenas of choice for all societies. Anthropology thus becomes a precious resource, not only because of the esoteric knowledge of strangely different cultures that it can offer (although this is not trivial in itself), but also because its characteristic techniques of defamiliarization can be made to question the globalizing assumptions that increasingly dominate political decision-making.

This critical stance required a conscious effort to free anthropology from some of its own historically accumulated associations with nationalism, colonialism, and global economic control. Anthropologists now freely admit that their epistemology is profoundly “western” in origin – this acknowledgment must be the first stage in creating the necessary critical distance – and, as Escobar points out, the anthropological endorsement of some early development efforts in Third World countries underwrote very particular forms of order and rationality. When Escobar insists that the distinction between applied and academic anthropology has become tired and unproductive today, he challenges a part of the currently dominant symbolic order – of which the logic of development constitutes another segment. By turning the spotlight of anthropological analysis on this global cosmology, we can identify its workings more clearly and so stand back in order to make more informed decisions about the extent to which we are prepared to go along with it.

From Common Sense to Multiple Senses: Practising theory in expanded spaces

Anthropologists have good reason to be especially sensitive to the implications of visualism. Here one might see in Don Handelman’s argument, discussed in some detail here and in greater detail in his *Models and Mirrors* (1990, 1998), that the modern, bureaucratic state employs spectacles – visual performances – in place of ritual, an illustration of the dramatic rise of the

visual in the modern economy of power. Spectacles, in this (admittedly far from exhaustive) sense of the term, are a means by which power, especially bureaucratic power, perpetuates itself. The uncertainty that Handelman sees as an essential component of ritual is erased by the all-seeing eye, dramatically summarized in Foucault's (1975) metaphor of the Benthamite panopticon, of spectacle that reduces the citizen to the role of passive witness. Citizens may believe that they are watching the show; but Big Brother is – or may be – watching them. This is not (as in the evolutionists' view) the story of the rise of disembodied logic, but that of the historically contingent emergence of one embodied capacity – sight – that permitted an exceptionally comprehensive technology of control and thus also a fully self-reproducing teleology of power. That teleology – sometimes called “visualism” – permeates anthropology as much as it does other social sciences (note the phrase “participant observation,” commonly used to describe the principal field methodology of the discipline); only by making the senses an empirical topic of anthropological appraisal, as in a chapter of this book, can we hope to regain an appropriate sense of critical distance. There is something disproportionate, as Constance Classen and others have noted, about the degree to which sight has been privileged as the locus of authoritative knowledge. There is also a danger that analyses that appear to treat bureaucracy and spectacle as spaces in which agency can get no purchase may inadvertently do the state's own work of homogenizing society. But it remains useful – indeed, vital – to remind ourselves that spectacular performances may indeed provide authoritarian regimes with the means to enact an especially pernicious form of visualism – as long as we also remember to look behind the scenes and to catch the knowing winks and cynical frowns of the spectators, as well as the nonvisual signals (such as the management of food tastes) that may convey subtler but more durable messages still. And in thus de-centering the visual, we may also gain a more critical purchase on the verbal – another beneficiary of western (or even “global”) technologies of information.

The primacy of the visual in social control is a relatively recent (eighteenth century) and localized (western European) phenomenon, although in some regions (such in those south European and Middle Eastern cultures in which the “evil eye” maps patterns of individual jealousy) ocular symbolism has long been associated with malign surveillance. Anthropology, itself implicated in the colonial project, has not escaped that “visualist” bias (Fabian 1983). Indeed, it enhances the marginalization of whatever is classified as “traditional.”

Because visual idioms of representation have become quite literally the common sense of the modern, industrial world, they have also become relatively invisible – a revealing metaphor in itself. Resemblance is usually construed as a resemblance of visible form. Anthropologists have not proved immune to this normalization of the visual. It is noteworthy that even though – or, indeed, because – visualism has so fully displaced other sensory preoccupations in the representational practices of anthropology,

however, the discipline has only recently produced a correspondingly intense analytical concern with visual media, although the situation is now beginning to change.

The lateness of this development is not as strange as it may at first appear to be. Not only is there the curious paradox of the invisibility of the visual, but the media seemed too “modern” to fit a discipline supposedly concerned with archaic societies. Viewing was something done by active observers rather than by passive ethnographic subjects. Moreover, there was the problem of how to deal with the manifest implications of the visual for recreation and thought, which meant attributing both to exotic peoples. It also raised difficult questions about how a discipline disinclined to probe psychological inner states except as objects of representation (see Needham 1972; Rosen, ed., 1995) could address such phenomena. Yet addressing such issues is crucial to understanding the social role of visual media, as Sara Dickey has emphasized. It is also a sensitive issue because it breaches the defenses of collective intimacy in the cultures we study, our own included.

But the major shift, one that is centrally important for understanding the relevance of anthropology to the contemporary world, may not be the insight it yields into the secret spaces of national cultures, important and interesting though this is. The change that particularly distinguishes anthropological approaches to the visual and other media from those of more textually based disciplines has been a strongly intensified focus on practice and agency. The media are anthropologically important today for two principal reasons, both connected with practice and agency: first, because media often portray the actions of differentiated subjects rather than of members of a supposedly homogeneous “culture”; and second, because the same concern with agency leads to ethnographic research on how social actors relate what they encounter in the media to their own lives and social settings, thereby generating ever more unexpected fields for new forms of agency. It has become clear that the scale on which mass media operate has in no sense resulted in a homogenization of agency; on the contrary, it has provided a means of magnifying differences at many levels.

Here the new ethnographic work on the media, notably including Dickey’s and Mankekar’s (1993a), particularly comes into its own. This new scholarship, as Dickey notes, engages the roles of viewers as well as producers, and joins a larger and growing literature on material culture, including, but not exclusively devoted to, consumption and material culture (e.g., Miller 1987). In another dimension it should also be compared with the extensive work on self-production and its relationship to the production of artisanal objects (e.g., Kondo 1990). It is clear that mass production has not necessarily meant homogeneity of either interpretation or form, any more than the persistence of a strong sense of cultural identity necessarily entails the suppression of individual forms of agency – western stereotypes of conformist Others notwithstanding.

Examining the ways in which viewers relate to the portrayal of roles also suggests new methods for eliciting the underlying assumptions that people make

about those roles. In assuming a homogeneous popular culture, we would be falling into a conceptual trap. Although it was once thought that only “archaic” societies were truly homogeneous and homeostatic, this teleological view of society, culture, and aesthetics is an invention of the modern industrial imagination about exotic “others” – and, as Handelman has indicated, it has, significantly, been most fully actualized in the aesthetic programs of such modern totalitarian ideologies as Nazism.

The myth of the homogeneous Other is deeply entrenched, and it has exercised a durable influence on anthropological theory even in such modernist arenas as the study of visual media. It has also, in recent years, generated strong reactions. Even leaving aside the sheer vastness of the Indian film industry and its complex impact on other Third World regions, the South Asian focus in this work is thus probably no accident. Ethnographers are struggling especially hard to disengage their view of this region from long prevalent social-science constructions of rigid hierarchy and ritualistic conformism. The convergence of media studies and an anthropological interest in agency thus significantly directs attention to newly empowered local voices (and to the ways in which some of them may be disenfranchised as well).

This new individuation works against the older idiom in which the Other has always been represented as homogeneous. That homogenizing process does not always concern only the colonialist view of geographically distant populations, since it may also be used of “peasants” and “the working class” closer to home, but, as a form of representation, it seems universally to serve as both the instrument and the expression of power.

That coincidence of instrumentality and meaning is an additional feature of the current intellectual landscape in anthropology. Sterile debates long pitted idealist against materialist approaches. In these confrontations, the Cartesian sense of a radical separation of the mental from the material was rigidly maintained at least until the rise of a critical Marxist structuralism (see, notably, Godelier 1984, for a major critique). Yet already at that point, in the influence of the heritage of ordinary language philosophy on both sides of the Atlantic (e.g., Ardener 1989; Bauman 1977; Needham 1972), recognition of semiotic effects as material causes – the impact of rhetoric on political action, for example – posed a productive challenge to what was, after all, the expression of a particular conceptual frame within one, admittedly dominant, cultural tradition.

Here the anthropological significance of media becomes especially clear. It is the enormous range and power of the media that turns them into something of a test case for the analysis of modern social formations. The conventional view has long been that they are forces for homogeneity and the loss of cultural autonomy. Indeed, they amplify the symbolic force of political action, serving ever larger and more encompassing forms of authority.

But by that token, as Abélès makes clear, they also magnify the power of rhetoric and symbolism to the point where these can hardly still be considered as mere epiphenomena. The performance of a ritual act on television can be an important piece of “political action.” It is a demonstration of what the ordi-

nary language philosophers had already argued in the domain of everyday interaction: the power of words to effect change, intended or not. For this reason, the power of the media has especially shown up the artificiality of the old distinction between the material and the symbolic. But by insisting on the huge variety of audience responses to the media and on the now dramatically magnified representation of agency as much as of normativity, anthropologists have been able to go still further: they have traced the complex processes, sometimes culminating in surprisingly radical effects at the national and even international levels, whereby extremely localized reactions may come to affect the life of nations.

In this regard, it is especially useful to contrast Handelman's radical separation of ritual from spectacle with Marc Abélès's view of a modernity in which the relationship between the local and the national or supra-national is in constant flux, and in which older "referents" combine with modern "processes" to yield a modern specificity that is nevertheless analysable with the instruments developed in an older anthropology for the study of face-to-face societies exclusively. Abélès, like Benedict Anderson (1983) and Bruce Kapferer (1988), has noted the resemblance between nationalism and religious community. I would add that the Durkheimian model of religion as society worshipping itself (Durkheim 1925 [1915]) is far more apposite to the case of nationalism, as Gellner also recognized (1983: 56), than it ever was to the Australian religions that Durkheim regarded as elemental illustrations of his thesis. With nationalism, we actually know, in many cases, who the Durkheimian gremlins were. Indeed, some of them – like Ziya Gökalp, framer of the secularist constitution of modern Turkey – were his ardent admirers. The French colonial effort in Morocco similarly directly translated Durkheim's teleological reconstruction into a prescription for the government of exotic others (Rabinow 1989). Here again we see the power of a reflexivity that is historically and ethnographically grounded.

We are what we study. This is reflected in anthropological fieldwork – a process akin to problem-solving in social life, the conceptual *débrouillardise* mentioned in the Preface, in which the learning of culture largely proceeds through an "edification by puzzlement" (Fernandez 1986: 172–9). As a reaching for larger, more inclusive explanations of experience at the level of the localized and the particular, it is also and at the same time a questioning of order – and especially of claims that a given order is rooted in eternal truth, whether cosmological or scientific. It is, in a word, the critical appraisal of common sense. It is thus a fundamental source of human understanding, accessible only at moments when the categorical order of things no longer seems secure – when theory does not so much yield to practice as reveal itself as a form of practice in its own right.

Theory as practice: that insight and the intimacy of the observational scale at which it is activated largely distinguish anthropology from its closest neighbors on the map of the social sciences. It is abundantly clear that the vast increase in available topics, scale of perception, and sheer complexity of subject-matter do not seem to be compelling the discipline to an early retirement. On the con-

trary, it is precisely at such a moment that the more intensive focus of anthropology becomes especially valuable. The amplification of symbolic actions on a global scale gives such actions a resonance that perhaps we can sense only through the intimacy – now defined in a host of new ways – of ethnographic research.