

- OUTRAS LETRAS

ANTHROPOLOGICAL WRITING AND ITS SUBJECTIVITY IN THE INTERPRETATION OF OTHER CULTURES

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Abstract: This article is an attempt to deconstruct anthropological discourse about Other cultures as a reflection of the reality of these cultures. The need for clarity and certainty or more specifically the appeal objective science has had until recently in the human sciences has led anthropology to dismiss the interpretative nature of the knowledge it creates about the cultures it studies. The aim of this article is to show the complexity of anthropological discourse and the asymmetrical power structure it involves.

Keywords: anthropology; discourse; interpretation.

It cannot be denied that for centuries anthropology has been a Western science, since, up until recently, it has always been the West that has studied and interpreted the non West, the Other. Ethnographers and anthropologists from the West used to be the ones who discovered, studied and tried to interpret the cultures of people whose ways of living were very different from the Western ones. The Other never claimed to study the West.

Anthropology constructs a dialogical relation and produces subject and object positions that are implied in the problematic of cultural difference that constitutes this discourse. Scott (1989, p. 2) explains:

The subject that establishes within its gaze a field of objects to be observed, questioned, translated, and finally represented in another place at another time is neither anonymous nor placeless. It always occupies intersections of privilege at once epistemological, political, and geographical. To be sure, in recent years anthropology has been called (and has called itself) into question on grounds that seek to make visible these intersections. But at least one skeptical commen-

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tator has recently maintained that the “problematic of the observer” has been “remarkably underanalyzed” in the “revisionist anthropological current.” The question Who speaks? For what and to whom? remains muted. For what interests me here is the question of the postcolonial anthropologist in the making of a postcolonial anthropology.

Scott (1989) makes clear that the historical, cultural, ideological and social context of the anthropologist or his/her *locus of enunciation* influences his/her way of seeing this Other. The anthropologist, in his/her effort to understand this Other uses his/her own systems of knowledge. This means that the knowledge constructed on this Other is always mediated by the systems of knowledge of the anthropologist, his/her ideology. The work of mediation involves constituting the unknown knowledge through the knowledge of the mediator, the anthropologist. Scott (1989, p. 3) describes it:

The anthropological journey – like all true journeys – entails a continuously recursive movement or drift: at once a departure and a return in which knowledge is always at least double –simultaneously knowledge of something other and self-knowledge, and each but a term in the invention of the other.

Even from the very beginning, we observe a tendency Western explorers and scientists had, not only of studying and acquiring knowledge of the newly found spaces and their people but also of their will to control and master their cultures and modes of life by considering them inferior to their own. However, by observing the newly found cultures only through the lenses of the Enlightenment, they were incapable of reaching them, absorbing their wisdom and learning from them.

Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 5), an American anthropologist and ethnographer, would say that Western travel writers and scientists were caught in *webs of significance* that their culture had spun for them as it does for each one of us. They could only study the Other’s culture by using conceptual frameworks that were western and fraught with the capitalist, modernist, industrial and “democratic” ideas. When they observed and tried to understand Other cultures they would use conceptual frameworks that were part of a culture that was located somewhere else. These *webs of significance* somehow blinded these anthropologists to the conceptual frameworks that the Other’s culture was constituted by.

Obviously, this cultural difference between the West and Other civilizations affected the methods the West used in order to study the Other’s cultural manifestations. The Western researchers were not conscious that this relationship was overridden by ethnocentrism which “is the failing by which the West judges other cultures in comparison with its own” (HÉNAFF, 1998, p. 23). The discourse that the West used to construct on this Other did not recognize their cultural difference.

THE UNCEASING SEARCH FOR MEANING

Studying a culture involves diving into its symbolic forms. However, this study is not objective but depends on the *locus* of the observer: where they are, who they are, their age, social status, their cultural and ideological formation. The positionality of the voice passes “through the confession known as biography,

the body, social markers like race, sex, and gender, and, then, wrap these things up in that grand narrative known as experience” (BRITZMAN, 1997, p. 31). And this is a blind spot for the researchers since they have to know themselves in order to understand how they get to the meanings they create of someone’s culture. However, as Britzman (1997, p. 31) acknowledges “the struggle is with knowing the self when consciousness itself is founded in resistance”.

Anthropologists find themselves in the condition of trying to present the un-presentable, of trying to know what is not accessible to knowledge. Although researchers have to create categories in order to describe the cultural expressions of the people they study, it is imperative to be aware that these categories are part of the conceptual and ideological universe of the researchers’ culture and not of their subject of study. And by using their own categories, researchers eliminate the difference they are interested in studying.

Moreover, these fictitious similarities create a narrative of the human nature that seeks to find out what is universal, common, natural and constant in the human nature and ends up doing away with the local, idiosyncratic, unnatural and variable. Drawing a line between the universal and the local or the constant and the variable is extraordinarily difficult.

Geertz (1973) is interested in figuring out what is constant and what is idiosyncratic in the conceptual structures people use to construct meaning. Or as he expresses in his own words:

[...] how to frame an analysis of meaning-the conceptual structures individuals use to construe experience-which will be at once circumstantial enough to carry conviction and abstract enough to forward theory. These are equal necessities; choosing one at the expense of the other yields blank descriptivism or vacant generality. But they also, superficially at least, pull in opposite directions, for the more one invokes details the more he is bound to peculiarities of the immediate case, the more one omits them the more he loses touch with the ground on which his arguments rest. Discovering how to escape this paradox-or more exactly, for one never really escapes it, how to keep it at bay-is what, methodologically, thematic analysis is all about (GEERTZ, 1973, p. 313).

What the anthropologist is talking about in the above quotation is the constant search for some basic and universal structure of thought and meaning in the human species; something that is not related to culture or the psychological world of the individual. However, there is no existing methodology that can guarantee the separation of these elements which intertwine in order to form a complex whole.

Besides the difficulty of defining what is universal and what is local there is a further setback: defining what is innate to the human being and what is culturally regulated. Geertz (1973, p. 52) believes that “becoming human is becoming individual, and we become individual under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives”. Moreover, culture works as a program, a template or blueprint that organizes social and psychological mechanisms. However, at the end of the road, the internal world of sentiment and desire guides people’s actions. The interior subjective world of thought and emotion is a kind of universe that reflects exterior reality and behavior as the result of the inner psychological reality of the person performing culture.

CULTURE AND ITS SYMBOLIC STRUCTURES OF MEANING

Culture uses symbolic forms of meaning-making that give expression to the performative acts of this culture. Humans have the ability to create and use symbols that give meaning to their lives. People interpret their experiences, give meaning to the events in their lives and conduct their lives by using symbolic structures of meaning that are intrinsic in their cultures.

Culture patterns can be identified in different aspects of human life: ideological, religious, social, aesthetic, scientific and others. These patterns or systems guide people's actions and condition them to behave in a certain fashion and not other. This means that culture patterns together with psychological and sociological forces regulate human actions. Culture, in this way, seems to form our conceptual and ideological world along with our psychological and social structures.

Geertz (1973) assumes that it is through culture patterns, which are ordered clusters of significant symbols, that people make sense of the experiences they go through in life. These symbols are material expressions of thought and are filled with meaning. This meaning is always subtle, obscure and fleeting but also given to interpretation. When researchers study the culture of the Other, they tend to study these culture patterns which give meaning to the reality of their practitioners and help them conduct their lives in certain ways acceptable in their culture.

One of the aspects of cultural life that uses symbols to express itself is religion which employs rituals, which are sacred actions, in order to prove its veracity. Geertz (1973) supports that in a ritual the imagined and the lived world fuse under the agency of symbolic forms and these two worlds become one and produce a transformation of the practitioner's sense of reality. Rituals construct meaning and teach people a form of social interaction. In order to reach some understanding of the mechanisms religion employs so that it can condition the behavior of its practitioners, we should first analyze "the system of meanings embodied in the symbols which make up the religion proper, and, second, the relating of these systems to social-structural and psychological processes" (GEERTZ, 1973, p. 125).

Religious systems are concerned with metaphysics, which is the nature of being and the world. The apparatus religion uses to perform its rituals is saturated with moral and ethical solemnity. Sacred symbols have a fabric and all of them together relate an ontology and a cosmology to an aesthetics and a morality. Each religion's ethics establishes guidelines for the followers' behavior, quality of their lives, the way they relate to themselves and to the world. This morality shapes and gives a character to people's lives.

Moreover, social structures are symbolic actions and their study can lead to some incomplete understanding of a certain people's culture. Culture is responsible for the quality of social relations people form and the social networks they establish. Geertz (1973, p. 259) defines as primordial attachment, the affinity that stems from the "givens" of social existence, such as kin connection, belonging to a particular religious community, speaking a certain language or dialect of it, and following specific social practices.

These primordial attachments or ties tend to become politicized since they are seen as battle grounds for the adjustment of cultural manifestations to the needs of a fast changing world. The individuals acting in a culture are constantly

constructing their identity, as a way of being acknowledged and having some kind of worth in the society they live. People usually seek social acceptance together with social ascendance and at the same time seek to construct a more just society, pursue an effective political order and they aspire to a greater involvement of their nation in international politics.

Culture relates symbolically to a country's politics. In this case, culture is not seen as rituals, doctrine or customs but as the conceptual world that gives meaning to the human experience. When this conceptual world and structures of meaning are applied to politics, they form the public world in which we live and function.

Ethnologists usually describe the surface patterns of a culture. These patterns might be people's customs, traditions and cultural manifestations which are combined in different ways to form a system. However, each culture and each human being does not create this system out of the totality of the cultural manifestations but carefully selects which ones to adopt and how to combine them. This cultural inheritance is formed by ideas and beliefs that are handed down to the participants of each culture from generation to generation.

When ethnologists describe these surface patterns of a culture, the culture's customs, beliefs and institutions, they, in fact, are trying to figure out the deeper structures of thought that regulate all cultural manifestations and build conceptual schemes out of particular images. The relationship between a symbolic structure and its referent, the basis of its *meaning*, is fundamentally "logical". Nonetheless, logic acquires different forms and characteristics in specific periods of time and in different parts of the world.

ETHNOGRAPHIC WORK AND ITS DISCOURSE

Ethnographic description of people's cultures is a science whose practitioners do a kind of anthropological work. Geertz (1973, p. 15) suggests that anthropological writings are interpretations or fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are "something made", "something fashioned". The mind of the Western ethnographer, molded by the concepts of enlightenment, capitalism and neoliberalism, studies and tries to understand the savage mind and its neolithic intelligence.

In order to gain access to the Other's culture and its symbol systems, anthropologists inspect events performed in that culture. However, the passing event which anthropologists freeze in their discourse becomes a social discourse, an account that can be consulted again. Moreover, the anthropologist's description of the event makes the event acquire a Western coherence and logic that in fact it does not have. Coherence, order or "universal properties of the human mind" (GEERTZ, 1973, p. 20) are not common to cultural systems and to pretend in our discourse that they are, is to reduce the complexity of reality.

Events are intertwined, dense and commingling of the logical and the absurd. Most of the times, it is the subaltern cultures that have to submit themselves to the descriptions and interpretations made by Western anthropologists and in many ways this description of the Other's culture is an invention of the anthropologist. The anthropologists by choosing the events they assume are representative of a specific culture end up moving from local truths to generalizations. This comes as the result of the human will to discover some universal structures of human thought that are not cultural but are part of the human structure as such.

Geertz (1973) considers that ethnographic analysis of cultural manifestations should not seek to make generalizations across cases but try to make thick description possible within each case. Codifying abstract regularities of diverse cultural manifestations and turning them into some kind of theory should not be anthropology's main endeavor since "cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is" (GEERTZ, 1973, p. 29).

Human thought is social in its origins, functions, forms and applications. An anthropological analysis consists in understanding the complexity of the symbolic dimensions of social action which are influenced by the existential dilemmas of human life and people's emotional world. Cultural expressions in segments of human life such as: religion, art, law, science, ideology, common sense and morality should be seen in relation to how the human psyche appropriates them. De-emotionalized descriptions of cultural phenomena miss the most important factor for the expression of culture.

Science still has not developed a method of describing and analyzing cultural events and manifestations that can lead to some understanding of the way that these experiences are perceived by the participants in the culture. People's conceptual structure embodied in the symbolic forms of cultural expression are usually described in an impressionistic form: the scientific descriptions and analyses of cultures are always influenced by the observers' positioning since they are always positioned in space and time and their perspective is constantly defined by this positioning. There can never be a systematic way of describing and analyzing cultural manifestations since the categories the observers create are closer to the ones existing in their own culture than the ones found in the culture of the observed:

[...] meaning is not intrinsic in the objects, acts, processes, and so on, which bear it, but-as Durkheim, Weber, and so many others have emphasized-imposed upon them; and the explanation of its properties must therefore be sought in that which does the imposing-men living in society (GEERTZ, 1973, p. 405).

The fundamental reality of people can be observed in the way they conduct their daily life, the way they live their routine experiences and how they act and react to the stimuli offered by their everyday world. While people are performing culture they use significant symbols, or more specifically clusters of symbols which are the material vehicles of perception, emotion, and understanding. Analyzing any culture should focus on these significant symbols and on the regularities of human experience that are essentially connected to the formation of these symbols. Geertz (1973, p. 408) believes that:

[...] a workable theory of culture is to be achieved, if it is to be achieved, by building up from directly observable modes of thought, first to determine families of them and then to more variable, less tightly coherent, but nonetheless ordered "octopoid" systems of them, confluences of partial integrations, partial incongruencies, and partial independencies.

Analyzing a culture is similar to sinking into a literary text. Having the written word as a stimulus readers interpret the text according to their own conceptual and emotional world that has been constructed in accordance with their culture and immediate context. When we try to access the system of ideas that

informs any culture, our approach should not be similar to deciphering a code but to penetrating a literary text. We should try to figure the social semantics of the culture we are observing. Metaphorically speaking, cultures should be seen as texts, as fictional stories that are constructed using social resources.

Researchers who try to see cultures as texts, or more specifically as narratives, they tend to stop looking for the essence of a culture or a common nature of the human species. Cultures as narratives are trying to say something about the way their participants conceive reality and act in it. The performance of this cultural expression says something to the researcher, too. And probably each researcher who enters in touch with different participants performing culture perceives and understands different aspects of this culture depending on the way the different symbolic forms speak to him/her.

Hénaff (1998, p. 25) reckons that researchers of Other cultures should go through a process of interior transformation and pass “the test of *dépaysement*”. By *dépaysement* he refers to the crossing to Otherness and this process demands from the researcher the questioning of the discipline of anthropology and the methodologies it uses. It obliges the anthropologists to accept that their task is never an innocent one and that their ultimate undertaking is the responsibility they bear towards these Others and the recognition that they must defend the societies which they study.

The researcher who claims to study the different culture poses as an aggression by only being present while the Others are acting in their culture. The incommensurability of this relationship is expressed whenever the dominant culture gives itself the right to label the Other by using concepts and systems of thought that belong to the researcher’s particular culture. Ethnologists need to reevaluate their methodology and consider that it can never be objective or free from the criteria and standards that are part of the culture of the observer and not the observed.

Being an ethnologist, an anthropologist or a researcher of representations of Other cultures makes you occupy a position in between, in the interstices of not just two but many cultures since cultures are not monolithic but made up of many different texts or narratives that are absorbed by each of its participants in various and complex ways. As Todd (2009, p. 29) affirms “we do not choose our conceptual heritage, but we can work within and against it simultaneously”.

James Clifford (1988, p. 100), an American critical anthropologist, questions the nature of any representation and the authority the one doing the representation exercises over the subjects of his/her study:

In ethnography the current turn to rhetoric coincides with a period of political and epistemological reevaluation in which the constructed, imposed nature of representational authority has become unusually visible and contested. Allegory prompts us to say of any cultural description not “this represents, or symbolizes, that” but rather, “this is a (morally charged) story about that”.

When Clifford (1988) uses the term allegory he is interested in showing the impossibility of ever reaching some kind of literal meaning by studying the symbolic language of a culture. When we analyze an ethnographic account, might it be verbal or visual, “what one sees, the imaged construct of the other, is connected in a continuous double structure with what one *understands*” (CLIFFORD, 1988, p. 101). The participants of the culture perform their cultural expressions the way they understand them. Ethnologists write about these cultural expres-

sions the way they understand them. Readers of the ethnographic accounts read and study the anthropological narratives and apprehend them according to their own conceptual world.

In spite of all the knowledge we have gained on the problems of the methodology of anthropological representation, we have to accept that still the process of representation has not changed. Any representation still seeks to dive deeply into the culture of Other and reach some kind of transcendental truth. For Clifford (1988) this irrepresentability of representation acquires an allegorical tone. And it is allegorical, in my understanding, because it uses symbols in order to reach a realistic content of the Other's culture. However, the coherence that the researcher discovers in the association between the symbols and the deeper structures of the culture studied are associations s/he makes that are entrenched in the ethnographer's own culture. Therefore the critical anthropologist admits that "ethnographic writing is allegorical at the level both of its content (what it says about cultures and their histories) and of its form (what is implied by its mode of textualization)" (CLIFFORD, 1988, p. 98).

When convincing theories and interpretations of a culture are recognized as metaphors or allegories, then what follows is the recognition that there is not a privileged form of interpretation. There are various and multiple symbols that can be used as a basis for the interpretation of the Other's culture. The associations of these symbols, registers or voices that the culture uses are made coherent into conceptual patterns that are not part of the culture under study but of the culture of the researcher.

Clifford (1988, p. 109) uses two metaphors in order to describe anthropological work:

Anthropological fieldwork has been represented as both a scientific "laboratory" and a personal "rite of passage." The two metaphors capture nicely the discipline's impossible attempt to fuse objective and subjective practices.

There is no way to liberate ourselves from our own structures of thought and see the world with Other eyes. The Other's reality is always sieved through our own cultural and ideological sieve.

The stories that anthropologists write are allegories that finally turn to be one story among many. The moment that ethnographic writing is not seen anymore as an interpretive account of generalized cultural facts or the discovery of human essence and the process of writing "is accorded its full complexity of historicized dialogical relations" (CLIFFORD, 1988, p. 109), the allegorical aspect of such writing surfaces. Interpretation is relational and dialogical between two or more cultures. The search for essence or origins becomes an empty space that can be filled with theories or interpretations that are never objective because they are culturally based.

"Other" cultures become texts, narratives that try to salvage and rescue some cultural expression that is different from the homogeneous expression of the all encompassing global culture. Nevertheless, through its description this culture is taken from its natural context and background and in this way its expressions become more foreign, alien or even exotic to the people that consume it as text. Consumers of Other people's cultures and experiences appropriate the moral and ideological constituents of this culture in order to learn something different about humanity.

There is no easy passage from the oral and performative cultural expression to its written version. The written text the anthropologist constructs is only partly dependent on the life and culture of the represented. It is more a text that constructs dialogically the culture of the Other having as its backbone the culture of the ethnographer. Anthropological writing is a corruption since when a cultural world is textualized it becomes contaminated by the language and culture of the ethnographer.

Cultures are unstable structures, always in the process of making and the practice of turning them into written texts in order to preserve them is something artificial. For Walter Benjamin (apud CLIFFORD, 1988, p. 119) the transience of things makes us want to find a way to preserve them for the future. A kind of knowledge you value and want to keep passing on to the next generations. This desire should not be resisted but it should come with the knowledge that my story is one of many possible and “truthful” ones. There ought to be an opening up and an acceptability of the different interpretations and theories that the dialogical relationship between the culture of the fieldworker and the culture of the subject of study raise.

The ethnographer should be responsible for the descriptions s/he makes of the Other’s culture. Clifford’s (1988) concept of allegory helps us confront and take responsibility for our systematic constructions of others. There are different voices speaking in any ethnographic account. The voice of the informant and practitioner of culture and the voice of the ethnographer that occupies a between space since it registers the encounter his/her own culture with the Other’s culture. There is no way of writing outside allegory. Ethnographic writing points to an impossibility of talking objectively about a different social reality. Ethnographic writing is always partial and incomplete since what we get is usually the fragmented experiences of the ethnographer in the specific social and cultural reality. What describes ethnographic writing is not objectivism and literalism but a mixture of subjectivism, objectivism and allegory.

When anthropologists are representing facts about other cultures, who is speaking are the cultures but the anthropologists, too. Modernity’s resistance to accept the impossibility of separation of true science from ideology has led it to ignore the identity of the speaking and thinking subject since it believes in the rationality of the scientist. However, science “is intimately bound up with the fabric of society” (LATOURE, 1993, p. 43) which is responsible for establishing the processes by which the product of research is attained.

Latour (1993, p. 13) perceives modernity’s pursuit of knowledge as being at one and the same time “a way of saluting the birth of ‘man’ or as a way of announcing his death” since modern humanism puts the human being in the center of its study but at the same time seeks to purify scientists from the social contract that intermediates any representation.

It is important to show the slippage and sliding of signifiers when writing an ethnographic description. Geertz (1973) borrows Gilbert Ryle’s notion of “thick description” as a way to get a better understanding of the Other’s culture. The data that ethnographers choose to expose are really their own constructions and this is inevitable. However, anthropological writing should use the methodology of “thick description” if it is interested in getting a better understanding of the Other’s conceptual world and culture.

“Thick description” is a form of narrativity that gives priority to the informer’s (in our case the Other) portrayal of his/her everyday experiences and life and also pays attention to the construction of identity the informer is involved in while relating his/her everyday affairs. Morawska-Vianna (2007, p. 153) believes in the advantages of thick description and she explains: the importance of every day narratives of the past and identity, and the realities they construct should be considered in anthropological analyses.

FINAL WORDS

We have tried to show that anthropological writing and its representations of Other cultures is never an objective, transparent and pure endeavor. Scientific work in human sciences is always influenced by the researcher’s social, historical, ideological and political context. In the case of ethnographic writing, the *locus of enunciation* of the researcher acts on the way s/he perceives the cultural manifestations of the Other and the interpretations s/he attaches to them. Thick description or the narratives the Others construct about their own cultural manifestations has been thought as one of the ways anthropologists can use in order to make the categories and the conceptual world of the represented emerge in this kind of discourse.

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Resumo: Este artigo é uma tentativa de desconstruir o discurso antropológico sobre Outras culturas como um reflexo da realidade dessas culturas. A necessidade de certeza e clareza ou, mais especificamente, o apelo que a ciência objetiva teve, até recentemente, nas ciências humanas levou a antropologia a descartar a natureza interpretativa do conhecimento que ela cria sobre as culturas que ela estuda. O objetivo deste artigo é mostrar a complexidade do discurso antropológico e sua estrutura assimétrica de poder.

Palavras-chave: antropologia; discurso; interpretação.

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