

35. Facing the other: ethnography and ethics of alterity

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When ethnography is acknowledged as a face to face personal interaction, its theory and practice are challenged by intersubjectivity. The question of knowing how such intersubjectivity alters our ideas about anthropological understanding is also the question of how face to face relations change the ethnographic enterprise towards an ethical praxis. Without negating the power saturated context of all ethnography, this panel is engaged in discussing the ways an ethics of alterity displaces differences of status and power in the field. Accepting it as the basis of relations in the field, means in a sense contesting the power unbalance implied in ethnography as a 'scientific' research, and displacing the classic dichotomy between us who understand and them who are understood. Facing the other as an ethical other questions the duality of subject and object, identifying the dialogical encounter between subjectivities as the primary object of anthropological practice. Ethnography then mutates into a hybrid object, a complex intertwining of crossing subjectivities, transforming each other in a tentative reciprocal grasping. As anthropology stops being an 'othering' machine, ethical questions about the ethnographic enterprise and knowledge become more visible and troubling. In dialogical relations we are constantly compelled to legitimate our presence, and not in an abstract way recurring to scientific alibis, but at a personal and subjective level. 'What are we doing there?' we shall be asked. And 'What am I doing here?', we shall ask ourselves. This panel is compelled to discuss the question of intention and reflexivity in its crossroads to the question of disciplinary identity.

Ethnography as a socio-cultural practice

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This paper discusses ethnography as a domain of cultural production in which the researcher is by no means the sole author: in this fashion ethnography emerges as an intersubjective practice. Ethnographic research produces knowledge that is necessarily the outcome of his/her subjective engagement with other subjectivities. In this sense intersubjectivity does not alter our ideas, it is rather the very ground of their production. If the ethnographer does not gather data, but s/he produces them, then ethnography is also ethical to the core: our choices, our concerns etc. do have an impact in the very production of ethnographic knowledge. Our research results constitute a specific way of interpreting the reality under investigation, according to principles that can (de-)legitimate certain forms of action, social and political interests etc.. To be self-reflexive then implies to be able to recognise the ethnographer's embodiment of institutional and academic knowledge and logics. What are we doing in the field? then emerges not just as an existential and methodological conundrum, but also as a political issue that must be addressed.

What am I doing here? Reflections from fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau

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Why are we doing anthropology? Is it still possible to legitimize anthropology in front of those we meet 'in the field'? Starting with such questions that emerged during my fieldwork in the Bijagó Islands, Guinea-Bissau, this paper deals with wider political and theoretical issues implied in contemporary ethnography in Africa. Deprived of the classical metaphysical legitimation of objectivity, anthropology faces today the puzzle of a discipline trying to rest epistemologically upon face-to-face interaction and individual sensibility. Yet, despite the idyllic perspective on field relationships proposed by phenomenological anthropologists, the question of how power and politics bias the ethnographic encounter still haunts and potentially undermines our discipline. What kind of personal relationship is it possible to establish in a field where unbalanced power relations, colonial legacies and neo imperialism still set the scene? The answer to this question does not lurk in individual sensibility, as if the anthropologist could bypass history and global politics and economy by virtue of his/her disposition to openness. Rather, we should acknowledge that intra-personal interactions always take place in a political field where power relations, unbalanced economic situations and traditions of domination do affect our representations and must therefore be re-integrated in our epistemological concerns.

'Do your parents think the Samaritans are primitives?': Ethic challenges of an ethnography of marriage in a minority community in Israel

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In the context of this paper, alterity shall primarily be understood as the perceived otherness of a minority as against the politically dominant group or majority in a state, often running along the ideological dividing line between „modern“ and “unmodern“. Being defined as “unmodern” can be a significant marker of alterity in minorities and may lead to their stigmatization, inferiorization, and exclusion. One of the innumerable realms of life to which “lack of modernity” can be ascribed is marriage: ought marriage to be an individual affair, left to individual decision (“modern”), or rather a family affair, arranged by elder for younger kinspeople (“unmodern”). The paper draws on fieldwork dialogues with Samaritan interlocutors who are wary that the ethnographer might expose their traditional conventions of marriage in front of a western, in particular an Israeli western, public, and thus contribute to their stigmatization as “unmodern” or even “primitive”. It will discuss the tight rope walk between the necessary critical stance towards interlocutors' statements, who often deny the existence of these conventions, and a possible need for self-censorship in representation of a sensitive part of life out of respect for the dialogue partners' fears.

Anthropologies dans le champ: recherche, intervention et participation sociale dans les contextes contemporains

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Quel est le rôle de l'ethnologue dans le cadre social et politique contemporain ? En face des tensions du monde actuel, sur lesquelles l'anthropologie est toujours plus souvent appelée à s'exprimer, quelles perspectives et quels modèles permettent d'interagir avec des interlocuteurs qui demandent au chercheur un positionnement et un rôle actif ? À partir d'un travail de recherche et d'intervention, qui relie des compétences psychologiques et anthropologiques pour faire face aux demandes de soin et de santé des citoyens migrants, cette relation se concentre sur les problèmes

inhérent à la classique définition de l'anthropologie comme discipline théorique. Tout spécialement, on veut interroger la séparation entre domaine de la réflexion et champ de la recherche (dichotomie qui se reproduit aussi dans la classique division entre théorie anthropologique et anthropologie appliquée) pour observer comme aujourd'hui le lieu propre de la réflexion se penche de l'académie au territoire. D'ailleurs, si le rôle du chercheur se mêle avec celui des autres acteurs sociaux – dans une activité où la connaissance ne se disjoint pas de la participation – alors il est urgent discuter, à côté de la perspective éthique de la responsabilité, la dimension pragmatique de l'intervention de l'anthropologue dans les domaines multiples où le problème de l'« alterité » est, aujourd'hui, impliqué.

A Meeting of Minds? An exploration of intersubjectivity at work in making plans for and with Gypsies

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The subject of this paper might seem best suited to an analysis of power relations – it concerns the exchanges of Gypsies and non-Gypsies in a Council planning meeting. I argue that my responsibility as an anthropologist and as a human being is to reach beyond an analysis of power and uncover the struggles for understanding and mutuality that underpinned the meeting process. My fieldwork involved working with Gypsies and Travellers in North East England. My role entailed getting to know and come to care for Gypsies and the people that worked with and for them. This paper concerns a meeting where council representatives met with local Gypsies. I counted myself as a friend of the Gypsies and also the Council officers. I needed to find a way of understanding what went on that paid full respect to the humanity of all those involved. I examine what was achieved in that meeting, and why what had been intended could not come about. We all had certain assumptions and expectations from which were drawn possible story lines which had a rhetorical and motivating effect. I show how the ability to engage in intersubjective interactions enabled us to build a shared sense of purpose – a shared storyline. We also see how coming from different traditions of practice made this process difficult as different understandings and expectations were drawn upon.

Bachtin's heritage in anthropology – alterity and dialogue

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Contemporary anthropology was confronted with its own professional culture intended as a practice of textualising the “other”. Consequently, realist modes of representation were rejected as no longer valid and convincing. Anthropology sought the solution in Bachtin's concept of “dialogism”. One of the key issue was to reduce the researcher-researched distinction. Personal tales from the field (“confessions”) were supposed to play that role but they were soon substituted by the idea of polyphonic fieldwork and its multi-vocal representation. Anthropologist's authority was “dispersed among interlocutors”. In practice actually, dialog was treated literally, leading to an overemphasis of the role of “the informants”, to the naive faith that the researched “knows better”, to the realist notion that there is a truth outside the dialog itself. This combined with the will for symmetry of multi-vocal representation of multi-vocal reality, so that the dialog become hostage of the modernist will to better represent reality. The idea of “dialog” just hid the practical dilemmas of fieldwork.

Taken into practice in fact, it became its opposite, masking a monologue inscribed in the process of representing and translating “life experiences”. Anthropological attempts to abandon representation (by evocation) and translation (by engagement) are in fact dialogs merely with and within professional culture, but far from the understanding of the anthropological Other.

