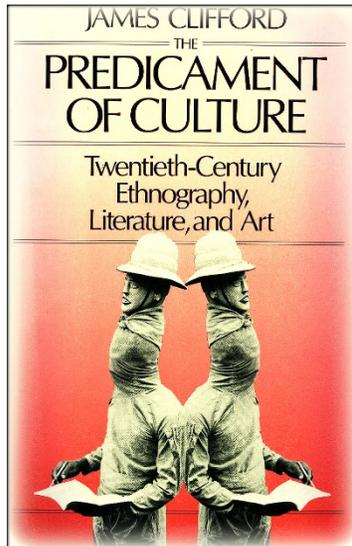


RESUME ON JAMES CLIFFORD'S THE PREDICAMENT OF CULTURE: TWENTIETH CENTURY
ETHNOGRAPHY, LITERATURE AND ART

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Resume on James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Harvard University Press, 1988), *Part One: Discourses, "On Ethnographic Authority"*

The text observes the development of ethnographic authority from the allegorical period of science in the 18th century (*Father Lafitau*) through its participant observation period in the 20th century (*Malinowski*) to the idea of the polyphonic novel, based on *Bakhtin's* theories.

The goal is to follow and explain the process of collaborative production of ethnographical knowledge and to represent the main difficulty in front of the coherent presentation, caused by the gap between the heteroglossia of the fieldwork and the mode of authority, always attempting to dominate and control. E.g. this chapter of *The Predicament of Culture* is a narration about the transformations of understanding about ethnography as interpretation of cultures, the crisis of its methodology, the problems of textualisation of an alien culture and the blurred figure of the actual author of the "polyphonic novel", what an ethnographic study actually is. At the end Clifford explains how the coherence of a text depends on the creative activity of the reader (in Barthes's semiotic terms) and why the ethnographic activity is plural and beyond the control of any individual.

Starting with the theme about formation and break up of ethnographic authority in 20th century social anthropology, the author sets the base of the subject on the antipositivist tradition of *Dilthey*. The text begins with the assumption that ethnography is a process of interpretation, not explanation, and follows the evolution of the science by discussing English, American and French examples. An evolution,

which, as it turns out, is often a cycle of rediscovering of discarded practices in the new approaches.

Being unable to present itself as the purveyor of anthropological knowledge about others any longer, in the middle of the 20th century the West needs to abandon and redistribute the colonial power, which leads to some radical cultural theories in the 1960s and 1970s, caused by the questioning of the activity of cross-cultural representation. The “heteroglossia”¹, and the assumption that difference is an “effect of inventive syncretism”², lead to an important question: how can we efficiently represent alien human groups without portraying them as historical and abstract, if we lack any systematic new methods or epistemologies? The scientific knowledge encounters the problems of verification and accountability. This situation is a part of the *crise de conscience*, spread over a large number of humanitarian sciences – which clear manifestation may be seen in the political-epistemological debates about writing and objective representation of otherness – in the field of ethnography.

So, the purpose of the anthropological science is being précised: it needs to bring concrete images of all possible “others” and a clear picture of the knowledge and power, connecting them. Plus, it needs to contain information about the specific historical relations of dominance and dialogue. And here comes the theory – in its role of an instrument, “a logic of the specificity of power relations and the struggle around them”³ – to support the pure reflection of a participant observation. As this all does not happen overnight, Clifford follows chronologically the experiments in the ethnographical approaches.

The “amateur period”, characterized by reports of travelers, missionary and administrators, who have no adequate scientific hypothesis background, ends up by 1883. The intermediate generation of the 90s of the 18th century (*Franz Boas* and *Torres Straits*) puts up an entirely new topic about qualified university-trained professional fieldworkers to discussion. Unfortunately, these researchers did not use to live long enough in a single locale and thus had no chance of “initiation”, so never became

¹ in the terms of Bakhtin’s idea of a special kind of Polyphony by interpreting the others in the era of expanded communications and intercultural influence.

² Ibid. 23.

³ As Michel Foucault defines it.

insiders and always remained by the scientist's documentary. Until late 19th century there has always been a distinction (and tension) between the understanding about the ethnographer, defined as describer translator of custom, and the anthropologist – the builder of general theories about humanity.

The following “rough period” could be divided into two sub-periods: from 1900 by the mid-1930s, when there wasn't any international consensus about valid anthropological methods, and between 1932 and 1960, when were established the norms of contemporary anthropology, for example how to transform the multiple subjective experiences (burdened by individuality, political views or social conventions) into an authoritative written account. During this period one could observe the change in strategies, transformation towards science of participant observation, critique of underlying assumptions, review of emerging textual practices and falling out of transcendent corrective figures such as God, Man or Culture.

The participant-observer

The idea about the leading role of the ethnographer and his/her validation as best interpreter of native life has started in the 20s and was connected with the names of *Mead*, *Radcliffe-Brown* and *Malinowski*. Setting the conditions for legitimacy through inventing the figure of the university-trained scholar, testing and deriving theory from a personal on-the-field experience, leads to a particular form of authority which combines the scientific validation with a unique personal experience. Their work on distinguishing from the amateurism results in a complex fusion of general theory, empirical research, ethnographical description and cultural analysis. It builds a new model on the understanding of the difficulty of grasping the world of alien people – the cultural relativism. Malinowski tries to give a new reflection upon the anthropologist as fieldworker-theorist, empathizing and presenting there, questioning, recording and interpreting. He had the pretension of objectiveness of the presented facts and claimed to have come over the subjective creations. His method of “haphazard” documentation was later criticized by Evans-Pritchard for not being bounded to a preliminarily set up theory. This was because Malinowski tended to use narrative constructs and illusive dramatization, which caused problems of verification and accountability.

To summarize, the “rough period” brings the figure of the participant-observer and establishes its scientific validity. A new literary genre is born – ethnography, which is

a synthetic cultural description, based on personal observations in accordance with the institutional and methodological innovations. The professional ethnographer masters the latest analytical techniques and models of scientific explanation, aiming to get to the heart of an alien culture through its institutions and structures. He/she has in mind the cultural relativism and this distinguishes him/her the most from the amateurs of the 19th century. These were the times when the normative standards of the scientific research were established, such as:

- *The fieldworker has to live in the native village;*
- *The fieldworker needs to use the local vernacular;*
- *He/she must spend a sufficient length of time on the field;*
- *Certain classical subjects and typecasting need to be investigated;*
- *There is no need to expertly “master”, but just to use the native languages;*
- *A new clear definition of “Culture” – ensemble of characteristic behaviors, ceremonies, gestures – in accordance with which the trained onlooker could record and interpret;*
- *A new theoretical apparatus was invented and its abstractions functioned as shortcuts to reach “the heart” of a culture, better than the standard concentration upon customs, beliefs and habits. Two new methods, which do not presuppose large contextual knowledge, were used – the “genealogical” one of Rivers and the “social structure method” of Radcliffe-Brown;*
- *The aim was to understand the whole through one or more of its parts, assumed to be microcosms or analogies of wholes;*
- *A new term is introduced – “ethnographic present”, which refers to a cycle of a year, ritual series and patterns of typical behavior, guarantying the synchronism and avoiding the difficulties of introducing a long-term historical inquiry. This “conjectural history” caused the problematic interpretation of diachronic processes.*

The above listed standards validated an “efficient ethnography based on scientific participant observation”⁴, best example of which is may be the published in 1940 “The Neuer” by Evans-Pritchard, defined often as a classical study. It researches the life of a tribe in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in the framework of socio-political structures in accordance with some abstract relations between quite fluid groups, without focus on

⁴ Ibid. 32.

“ecological” conditions as time, space and migration. The study is an empirical proof for the power of scientific abstraction to function as a lens and a method for arranging complex data. The only additional instrument Evans-Pritchard uses for the translation of un-interpretable terms is the second-person construction, which involves both reader and native textually.

Of course, participant observation was later contested for trying to combine the insider’s empathetic position for some evident occurrences and gestures with the outsider-scientist’s objective point of view, which aims to estimate them in a wider context. This formula looks quite paradoxical if not seen in the light of hermeneutic terms as dialectic experience and interpretation, the play of symbols and meaning in the tradition of Dilthey and Weber. The weak point turns out to be the underestimation of the language for the emphasis of the personal experience about the ethos of the culture, which bases the “feel”, for foreign context of the participant-observing scholar.

The German word *Verstehen* is used to describe the intuition combined with a critique of empathetic experience, lacking the conditions of coexistence in a shared world. There is no “common sphere” when entering an alien culture, no cross-points and interactions where the relations to certain facts, text or events to be commonly constructed. But still the human mind and the process of acquiring knowledge is based on “permanently fixed expressions”⁵. So the idea of similarity between understanding of cultural forms and reading of “texts” gives a hand when the methods of ethnography seem to be too problematic. It corresponds to some preliminary forms of interpreting as intuition, divination and aesthetic position towards the clues, traces and gestures observed⁶, e.g. to “conjectural knowledge”.

The culture as an assemblage of texts and discursive culture

The 1970s and 1980s mark the period in interpretative anthropology, which could be named “textual reading”. It turns the scientific focus on cultural objects which were considered before not meaningful and were passed unexamined. The central theme in the work of *Clifford Geertz* becomes the Ricoeur’s idea about “textualization”,

⁵ Whiliam Dilthey.

⁶ Clifford gives as example the investigations of Carlo Ginzburg.

understood as prerequisite to interpretation and a sphere where some “fixed expressions”⁷ are being born. In short, textualization refers to the process of forming “corpus” throughout unwritten behavior, speech, beliefs, rituals and oral traditions. This corpus is separated from the immediate discursive situation and a more or less stable relation of the corpus to a context is guaranteed by fixation in written. Thus the world could be apprehended and described on the basis of perception and circular movement around of a fact or event, part of it. In this process “discourse”⁸ becomes a text. Indeed, only partially. For discourse is connected with a specific occasion and dialogical usage of language. Unlike the text, it cannot be interpreted as open-ended or potentially public. It requires some personal experience of the situation it refers to. Discourse is relative and needs to break tear its relation (subordination) with authorial intention, specific utterance and presence of the speaker in order to become a legitimate text. Only such kind of discourse, turned into written text can travel and allows a later interpretation. The only appropriate “data, constituted in discursive, dialogical conditions”⁹, which refers to the ethnographical authority, is the one reformulated into textualized forms.

In connection with these problems arises the figure of the generalized author, who transforms the specific ambiguities and diversities of the concrete discursive situation into an integrated portrait by filtering. His/her main responsibility is to legitimate the fieldwork, judged as subjective, into a scientific appropriate mode and bring the childlike position of the researcher towards the culture onto the higher level of adult disabused knowledge, best leading to a quasi-invisibility of the narrating participant-observer.

The main jeopardy of such an approach could only be avoided by applying other instrument – the one of negotiation between at least two politically significant figures – scientist and alien – and the discursive paradigms of dialogue and polyphony, deriving from it.

⁷ In the terms of Dilthey.

⁸ Here “discourse” is used not in its common definition of a mode of organizing knowledge, ideas, or experience that is rooted in language or the usages of codified linguistic attached to a given type of social practice and its concrete contexts, but as a mode of communication, allowing a formalized way of thinking to become explicit, with a clear notion about the speaking subject and the immediate situation.

⁹ Ibid. 39.

Reactions against the “dialogic of ethnography”, characteristics of its language, who then is the author?

The discursiveness of every specific shared situation is defined through interlocution and context. As far as the fieldwork is based on language events, there is always a second person, owning half of the language used¹⁰. Whenever there is “I”, there is always, even implicit, “you” and no neutral forms of the worlds are possible. This makes the language various and heteroglossial¹¹.

Certain attempts were made towards the exploration of the possibilities of this dialogic of ethnology during the very late 1970s and the beginning of 1980s. The first stream tries to break with the literary-hermeneutical conventions by only representing a raw material in the form of interviews (see *Crapanzano* and *Dwyer*) with pretention for utmost dialogical authority – entirely opposite position to the interpretative authority. But then the monological authority is being just displaced in quite a contradictory way – the ethnographer is still typifying, reading texts in relation to the context and tis way constituting a “meaningful “other” world”¹².

The second manifestation of the crisis in this dialogical situation refers to the question who actually directs the research and representation of the “other” reality – the ethnographer or the informants. In 1980 *Rosaldo* puts up the fundamental question about the authority of the field notes and is the first who questions the legitimacy of this “directed writing” (where the aliens determine the themes and the volume of the shared narratives and histories) and the authority of informants. A look back to older texts would then find lots of additional information, included in them, which makes them “open” and allows multiple reinterpretations. Hence, the researcher himself can never entirely control the process of fieldwork and even thou he/she puts up the precise questions, the informant are inclined to control, limit or enrich the shared narrative. As a result, the scientist comes to “a diversity of descriptions, transcriptions, and interpretations by a variety of indigenous “authors” ”¹³.

The “polyphonic” novel

¹⁰ M. Bakhtin.

¹¹ Refers to coexistence of distinct varieties within a single “linguistic code”.

¹² *Ibid.* 44.

¹³ *Ibid.* 46.

This is Bakhtin's term, referring to the representation of speaking subjects in a field of multiple discourses. According to him this genre is a "carnavalesque arena of diversity"¹⁴, which could accommodate the dialogical interplay of voices, reconciling the open-ended creative subcultures' dialogue within the "culture" with the struggle of speeches and jargons of various groups and individuals within the "language". This, claims Bakhtin, is the only form, which allows the mixing of Flobertian "free indirect style" full of abstractions (aimed to control the discourse), with the subjective culture of the informants. Such a textual dialogism and polyphony, which allows various readings, is illustrated by "The Forest of Symbols" by *Turner* (where together with the leading informant a third figure – of the mediator, who transform the local jargon into a better understandable for the researcher prose, is presented). This example, together with the cited study of *Nash*, shows two more tendencies in the ethnological texts – first, aiming to combine the voices of informants into one and thus to turn the colloquy into dialog, and second – the impossibility of the utopia of actual plural authorship, foredoomed by the executive, editorial position, taken at the end by the ethnographer. Such a position, we may conclude, is not caused by some egocentric whim, but from the task to transform any "individual enunciation" into cultural significant generalization. However, the ethnography stream to opening and polyphony breaks the monological authority, burdened by western logical constructions and specific social-class ethical constructs, and this way allows not specifically intended readings, leaving the problem about the textual embodiment of authority unsolved.

¹⁴ Ibid. 46.