

# The pursuit of anthropology<sup>1</sup>

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Despite their pretense, the declaredly egalitarian, yet to be routinized, cross-cultural dialogues are never in fact between equals, for the absence of a fully governing convention, of a mutually acceptable third, fosters hierarchy – a (silent) assertion of authority over, an ‘understanding’ of, the position of the interlocutor. (Or its opposite.) There is little to mediate – to attenuate – the challenge each participant, coming, as it were, from somewhere else, poses to the other (Vincent Crapanzano 1991).

An alliance of multiple interests and perspectives is often a stronger political and social force than attempts to enforce a unitary movement (Michael MJ Fischer 1994).

## 1

### *Classics, theoretical history and anthropology in context*

Within the transnational communities of the social sciences, a common ideology that fosters ideals of universality and cements social relations between scientists of various origins is indispensable. It is within this sociological context that *classics* are situated. The systematic reading of texts considered to be classics initiate students in a tradition that, in the case of anthropology, consists of the ethnographic corpus of certain key authors who brought the ‘different other’ into the awareness of the west. This different other served not only as an existential mirror, but also prompted the refining of a theoretical corpus with universalist pretensions. The classics of a discipline are thus sociologically necessary and

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written after spending a semester (September/December 1995) as a visiting scholar at the Program of Anthropology at MIT. I want to thank Michael Fischer and Jean Jackson for the invitation and for the opportunity to update my perception of the North-American intellectual milieu. This is a longer version of a paper presented to the panel “How others see us,” American Anthropological Association Meeting, 1996, San Francisco. In Brazil, it was published in *Mana* vol. 3 (2): 67-102, 1997, as “Onde está a antropologia?”.

theoretically indispensable creations through which practitioners identify and reproduce themselves in diverse academic contexts; they make possible the existence of a community of social scientists, from which is derived both its singular relevance and its continuity.

The centrality of the classics, however, does not imply that social sciences be transformed into a mere story of disciplines, nor does it turn anthropology into history of anthropology. To the contrary, it requires the differentiation of internal and external proposals amongst practitioners and students of a field. Even though the historiography of anthropology generates ever more data to be considered, *theoretical histories* are phenomena internal to the practice of the discipline. They result from renovated theoretical reconstructions which both accompany and illuminate new ethnographic data.

Theoretical histories situate works and authors, and establish lineages of ethnographers, and thus of questions, problems and theoretical issues, that new generations inherit, seek to respond to and pass on modified to their successors. This endorsement does not make classics eternal, a-historic and disconnected from the context within which they were generated or appropriated. But beyond existing variations, the important sociological fact is that classics are essential for the continuity of a corpus of knowledge that, in certain circumstances, becomes disciplinary: the question of knowing who they are, where they are, or how they were incorporated, though important, is secondary to the fact of their fundamental existence.<sup>2</sup>

With these general considerations as points of reference, this paper seeks to examine some questions concerning the many expressions of anthropology in contemporary contexts. In a time when the idea of the end of disciplines – feared by some, celebrated by others – is being disseminated, I seek to examine the results of the processes of acculturation that develop within the academic world, and which inform continuities and questionings. I am interested in the possibility of pluralist universalisms, concerned with the founding basis of anthropology vis-à-vis the fragmentation of knowledge, and intrigued by the fact that *classics*, even in the post-modern context, remain essential. In this essay, I approach these broad questions by way of two ethnographic entrances: first, a visit to U.S. bookstores, where these questions can be uncovered; second, by focusing on two pairs of recent monographs, written by authors of successive

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<sup>2</sup> See Alexander 1987, for a comparison of the role of classics in the natural and in the human sciences.

generations, in the United States and India. I conclude with an agenda for the examination of anthropology with its dual face: at the same time one and many.

## 2

### U.S. bookstores

During the past century, anthropology has had diverse legitimate 'centers'. I assume that nowadays the United States plays a role socially equivalent to that of England during the first half of the century, or France in the golden moments of structuralism. In this context, a dialogue with North American anthropologists, or more precisely, with the works and authors who gain visibility and social legitimacy in that context, is inevitable for all of us.<sup>3</sup> But given their insertion in a moment and milieu in which the idea of fragmentation is transformed into positive value, anthropology becomes the target of criticism and faces threats of dissolution as a discipline.

Curiously, these indications that anthropology was a mere twentieth century phenomenon or, equally gloomy, that it became a type of normal science that only reproduces old models, is not confirmed in the daily life of anthropology departments. In those sites, the existence of multiple tendencies continues to be one of the most notable characteristics of the training of new specialists, and has not undergone major changes. Nonetheless, some modifications can be observed: first, the neighboring fields of anthropology (whether models or rivals) have altered – instead of archeology, biology, sociology or linguistics of the past decades, today when anthropologists leave their department they can be found in those of history of science, literary criticism or philosophy. Second, an extra space is reserved in graduate pro-seminars for readings that familiarize the student with recent works in cultural studies. It may not be inappropriate to use the term *magic* to indicate the power and the danger associated with these novelties first introduced in the seventies by the History of Consciousness programs, in the eighties by the cultural studies approach and, more recently, by the programs of Science, Technology and Society (known by the acronym STS). The polemics that involve these areas, even in the United States, does not impede these studies from being incorporated in the transmission of the

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<sup>3</sup> As pointed by Barth: "American cultural anthropology today dominates the international scene, both in mass and quality, and is largely trend-setting for what we all try to do" (1996: 1).

discipline. But perhaps not to overstimulate the students, zealous professors supervise the absorption of this literature by including it at the end of pro-seminars, *after* the classics have been read.

Universities reflect some of the changes, but the privileged ethnographic locus for seeing them is not to be found in the departments or the vanguard programs, but rather in bookstores. In the United States, academic bookstores are those special places – temples of a kind – that, existing between the search for knowledge and the power of the market, owe their survival to the spirit of circulation and reproduction that also motivates the academic world. Good bookstores need to keep a traditional/classic stock but must, particularly, exhibit novelties and anticipate new trends.

Today, to browse in a good academic bookstore in the U.S. immediately reveals the state of being at the threshold of a new century. If the nineteenth century ended in 1914 in Europe (E Weber 1976), in the United States the present one's close has been anticipated for this decade. Some have already begun to celebrate its end earlier, with dictionaries and encyclopedias reviewing the past one hundred years, but anthropology is not behind – as shown by the project *Late Editions* of annual reviews (see Marcus 1993). But if time has changed in bookstores, so space has also been altered: the reorganization of areas of knowledge was accompanied by the spatial redistribution of the shelves. Anthropology, which never occupied a prominent place, always being upstaged by history, political science, economics and sociology, is now even further hidden in tucked-away corners. The first impression is that the books are out of place, having migrated to other areas. The path that took many anthropology books to the shelves of cultural and literary theory, and from these to philosophy and science, took less than a decade. In this process there are other surprises. Works by a single author can now be classified according to different categories: for example, *Homo Hierarchicus* is to be found in Asia/Pacific, while *German Ideology* is in philosophy. The so-called anti-disciplines (Marcus 1995) are indexed by the presence of the term *studies* (media studies, feminist studies, science and technology studies, cultural studies), and have become a sign of the vanguard. Meanwhile, philosophy and science continue to share the greatest prestige, though today the term 'science' simultaneously includes knowledge, beliefs and criticism (as well as ethnography, as we shall see).

In this fragmented context, political-geographic (or cultural) distinctions (un)expectedly survive with increased vigor. In many cases, this type of definition is more

important than classification by areas of knowledge: thus, with regards to some recent monographs, *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (by Lila Abu-Lughod), is to be found in Middle East, *Debating Muslims* (by Michael Fischer and Medhi Abedi), in Islamic Studies; and, in Latin America, the highlight is *Death Without Weeping* (by Nancy Scheper-Hughes).<sup>4</sup> Finally, for the occasional visitor, an even greater surprise: traditional disciplines have disappeared or been renamed. Linguistics, for example, is a non-existent category today because, during the past few years, it was transformed into cognitive science.

In this process of displacement and fragmentation, anthropology itself became, within bookstores, a post-modern, *multi-sited* phenomena,<sup>5</sup> and it would not be an exaggeration to fear a Pyrrhic victory: today transformed into intellectual common sense – as occurred with psychoanalysis a few decades ago –, has anthropology not lost its social and cognitive specificity? This seems to be the crux of the current identity crisis of anthropology in the United States.

Fortunately, anthropology was never limited to anthropologists and has appeared, in concept and practice, in diverse contexts, under the name of philosophy, sociology, folklore, history, literary criticism (as today under cultural studies). Sometimes it is part of the humanities; other times, the social sciences. In India, anthropologists call themselves sociologists; in Brazil, anthropology grew out of sociology. However, in the process of selective absorption of intellectual fashions, we are and have been affected by the anxieties of the academic metropoleis – whether in the present state of fragmentation or, before, when high hopes were at stake for arriving at a definition of the discipline. If this is so, faced with self-decreed dissolution on one hand, but cognizant of the relative continuity of ideologies and institutions on the other, the discussion over the end of anthropology can perhaps be better formulated through some questions: Where is anthropology? Where will it emerge? Perhaps only a context as sensitive to academic classifications as the U.S. may generate so many opposing categories as we see today: not only *post* (as in post-modern), but also *multi* (as in multiculturalism), *anti* (as in anti-

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<sup>4</sup> But see Sigaud 1995 on the reception of Scheper-Hughes's book in Brazil.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus (1995) refers to the type of ethnography in which the objects of study are discontinuous when analyzed from the perspective of the world system.

disciplinary) and *pre* (as in pre-scientific, pre-categorical, pre-psychological, pre-sociological).<sup>6</sup> However, for our own peace of mind, though anthropology is under suspect, Geertz still considers himself to be an anthropologist – on what terms, we will see shortly.

### 3

#### Intermission: anthropology at home

For a long time anthropology has been defined by the exoticism of its subject matter and by the distance, conceived as both cultural and geographic, that separated the researcher from the researched group. The role of studying the social scientist's own society had been reserved for the other social sciences, such as sociology and political science.

This situation has changed. Throughout this century, the distances that separated the ethnologist from *his/her* group became increasingly less, with the inevitable questioning of the possessive pronoun (my/yours): from the Trobrianders to the Azande, and from there on to the Bororo by way of the Kwakiutl, in the sixties the academic community discovered that it was the approach, and not the subject matter, that unwittingly had always defined the anthropological endeavor. Lévi-Strauss played an important role in this change of consciousness by establishing a horizontality to social beliefs and practices in any latitude. From then on, the Durkheimian project of the beginning of the century could be reaffirmed, by various means, until Geertz, in the eighties, proclaimed, as if it were an original idea, "we are all natives now," with the *other* being located across the seas or across the hall.<sup>7</sup> After the long tradition in which anthropology's distinctive aspect was cultural and geographical distance, ethnography was brought home, in spite of admonitions from the older generation (see, for instance, Dumont 1986: 218). But the legitimacy of doing research at home required kinship studies

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<sup>6</sup> The notions of pre-scientific and pre-categorical orientations are derived from Lacan 1981; that of pre-psychological from Crapanzano 1992; that of pre-sociological from Latour 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Geertz 1983. But in 1968 Schneider had already made a similar association: "This is a society and culture that we know well. We speak the language fluently, we know the customs, and we have observed the natives in their daily lives. Indeed, we *are* the natives" (1968: vi).

as the test of validity and, perhaps it is no coincidence that Raymond Firth, in England, and David Schneider, in the United States, though with differing approaches, were pioneers in this task (Firth 1956; Schneider 1968).

It is certainly true that anthropologists who were also *natives* were spared from, since the beginnings of the discipline, the search for radical alterity. Thus, in 1939, Malinowski gave his approval to Hsiao-Tung Fei to publish his monograph on Chinese peasants:

The book is not written by an outsider looking out for exotic impressions in a strange land; it contains observations carried on by a citizen upon his own people. It is the result of work done by a native among natives. If it be true that self-knowledge is the most difficult to gain, then undoubtedly an anthropology of one's own people is the most arduous, but also the most valuable achievements of a field-worker (Malinowski 1939: xix).<sup>8</sup>

If Malinowski surprises us with his bold posture, he was not alone. The approval that Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard gave to the study by M.N. Srinivas on the Coorgs of India suggests that the canon could be developed independent of common practices (see Radcliffe-Brown 1952). The ideal of overseas research, however, remained the goal to be reached, to the point that, many decades later, and inserted into a tradition that systematically questioned the need of external fieldwork (Srinivas 1966, 1979, B eteille & Madan 1975, Uberoi 1968), in 1982, Satish Saberwal remarked, in a courageous article, that for many fieldwork in India could be seen as a soft experience, since it was mostly conducted within the language, caste and region of origin of the researcher (Saberwal 1982).

In the case of researchers from the ideologically 'central' traditions, who only recently came to accept the fact that they too are natives, the motives that led them to bring anthropology home are varied: for some, the inevitable conditions of the modern world explain it; for others, it emerges from the desire to transform anthropology in

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<sup>8</sup> T.N. Madan (1994: 156) mentions the two occasions in which Malinowski wrote forewords for books authored by his former students, Jomo Kenyatta and Hsiao-Tung Fei, and cites the passage above to point to Malinowski's defensive attitude.

'cultural critique' (Jackson 1987; Marcus & Fischer 1986). It is in this context that we can return to cultural studies in order to suggest an affinity between the current 'anti-disciplinary arenas' (feminist studies, media studies, cyborg studies, etc.) and an anthropology done at home. When it comes home, anthropology in the United States fragments into *studies*. In 1986, Marcus and Fischer anticipated this relationship:

Indeed, we believe that the modern formulation of cultural anthropology depends for its full realization on just such a catching up of its lightly attended to critical function *at home* with the present lively transformation of its traditionally emphasized descriptive function abroad (Marcus & Fischer 1986:4; my emphasis).

If in the fifties and sixties the linguistic model served as an inspiration, now literary criticism had become the new source for anthropologists. At home and accepting its critical function, bombarding the borders of the disciplines and proposing a remapping of the areas of knowledge, these attitudes prompted the questioning of the validity of 'facts' and the authority of the anthropologist as author. In this context, anthropology came to accept a new slate of legitimate writing alternatives: fieldnotes, biographies, interviews, science fiction, novels, manifestos — all constituting new styles of the broader genre of 'stories.'

Inevitably, this movement has been reflected in the wider academic world through a process of selective incorporation. Here, I would like to propose that, perhaps as an equivalent to the political aspect that the genre of *stories* achieved in the United States, in places like India and Brazil the analysis of socially relevant *events* predominates. Events maintain that powerful social dimension previously reserved for social drama and rituals by anthropologists; these are recreated in the text in the effort to capture the lived, lost and crucial moment that the narrator experienced (or which became significant). Furthermore: in the analysis of events, theoretical-intellectual and political-pragmatic objectives are fused; there is no guilt in being inspired by the classics (or, to the contrary, by post-modern influences), and universalism is mixed with 'committed' aspects that were always the hallmark of anthropology at home.



Of course, *events* are not discarded in the United States – though there, sometimes, they are fictional (see Stone 1996) –, and telling *stories* is the choice of many Indian and Brazilian anthropologists (e.g., Ramos 1990, for Brazil). But the theoretical, interpretative and political dimensions of these alternatives must be confronted. A comparison between the two strategies can be sociologically illustrative of the broader subject matter of putting anthropology ‘in context,’ but it also addresses the critical topic of how to perceive and present the ‘tangible fact’ that orients ethnography. I shall return to this point but, for the time being, I will move on to the second part of this exercise by confronting two pairs of books by North American and Indian authors. These books were published during the past three years: for a first generation I chose *After the Fact* (Geertz 1995) and *Pathways* (Madan 1994); for the following generation, *Critical Events* (Das 1995a) and *Making PCR* (Rabinow 1996).

#### 4

#### Stories and paths

*After the Fact*, by Clifford Geertz, and *Pathways*, by T.N. Madan, are tangentially autobiographical books. Clifford Geertz has great visibility in international terms; Madan, great prestige amongst those who frequent the ethnographic literature pertaining to India and religion. The parallel publication of both texts, in diverse contexts, is revealing.

Sensitive to textual form both authors show their initial contrasts in the type of literary construction they adopt. For Geertz, in a time when anthropology’s intellectual milieu and moral basis have changed, the anthropologist must also change. Nowadays, one may rely on “mininarratives that include the author” as a literary option. Following these new winds, *After the Fact* puts together accounts of a refined storyteller that, collected from a vast field notebook, provide the grounding for the author to discuss pressing topics. In his well-known style, the titles of various chapters are composed of a single word, all in the plural. The sequence Towns, Countries, Cultures, Hegemonies, Disciplines, Modernities, is certainly not aleatory (for example, the order ‘towns’ / - ‘countries’ / ‘cultures’ permeates the discipline; it is politically adequate that ‘hegemonies’ precedes ‘disciplines,’ and that it all ends with ‘modernities’). By the same token, all bibliographic references are consolidated in notes that are not part of the body of the text,

but are presented at the end as commentaries. (This same style had been adopted in Geertz 1968.) In this impeccable book, Geertz does not present a history nor a biography, but “a confusion of stories, a profusion of biographies.”

From India, *Pathways* also speaks of changes in the world, in the disciplines, in cultures and in modernities, but Madan opts for an intellectual ethnography which has as its starting point different paths and, as a general strategy, the question of the insertion of the social scientist in them. The perspective from which the anthropologist introduces himself into the world of social reflection and existing intellectual pathways is what concerns the author. “Pathfinders,” the first part of the book, is dedicated to the predecessors with whom Madan associated in particular moments of his career and who ended up influencing his work. Here the characters are of various origins and intellectual lineages: Mukerji, Majumdar and Srinivas, from the Indian subcontinent; Dumont, the ‘outstanding pathfinder’ who took over the legacy of Marcel Mauss; and North Americans, from Kroeber to the contemporary McKim Marriott. “In search of a path,” the second part, is more personal and reflexive: a series of essays about fieldwork in one's own society allows for a bold examination of the relationship between anthropology and the historical process of rationalization of the west; another essay illustrates the theoretical-comparative approach of ‘mutual interpretation’; a third looks at anthropology as ‘critical self-awareness.’<sup>9</sup> The question of cultural pluralism is then addressed through three empirical and contrasting themes related to various groups and different moments in the history of India. The topics include a discussion of religious ideology and ethnic identity of Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir, from the era of the partition of India to the beginning of most recent violence; the change in social identity in Muslim Bengal before and after the founding of Bangladesh; the differential reaction of India and Japan to western influence.

Mature writings of two ethnologists who experienced the past decades from different perspectives, their visions of anthropology are expressed in the books. But, once again, it is interesting to search for the place *where* they are expressed. For Geertz, for example, the controversy concerning the notion of discipline is such that he recognizes that anthropology was always poorly defined, offering more of a blurry image than a Foucauldian model. Yet the topic provokes him, causing him to ask if this is a scandal or a

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<sup>9</sup> See also Madan 1982, for a collection of essays presented to Louis Dumont; Madan 1987, for a series of interpretations of Hindu culture; and Madan 1992 for a collection of essays on religion in India.

force. At any rate, unable to say “what anthropology *is*” (1995:99), Geertz chooses to examine his academic career, placing emphasis on the institutions he formed a part of, the fieldwork he conducted in the extreme ends of the Islamic world, i.e., Indonesia and Morocco, and the world context of that moment – which provides a discrete examination of the role of the United States in international politics. On this journey, his times as a student at Harvard, then moving on to Chicago in the sixties, and finally Princeton, reveals a trajectory that was tied to multidisciplinary experiments, though with links to anthropology departments. This trajectory, told through short stories and picturesque examples (though also some murky episodes, such as the ‘Bellah Affair’), leads him finally to refute the idea of a discipline. Thus, if it is in professional life that the anthropologist can be found, this is achieved through indefiniteness:

The sequence of settings into which you are projected as you go if not forward at least onward, thoroughly uncertain of what awaits, does far more to shape the pattern of your work, to discipline it and give it form, than do theoretical arguments, methodological pronouncements, canonized texts. ... You move less between thoughts than between the occasions and predicaments that bring them to mind (Geertz 1995: 134).

T.N. Madan takes a different path. Though he also acknowledges moments and predicaments – that he develops in stories and fieldwork examples –, Madan makes intellectual pathways the nucleus of his argument and the position of the anthropologist the basis of his discussion. Suggesting the theme of disciplinarity, Madan acknowledges the sociological aspect of paths, but demonstrates that creativity and sociological constraints are not mutually exclusive. Since there are not exactly discoveries in anthropology but renovated efforts, these can only gain by the diverse locations of the researcher: the education of the anthropologist allows one to experience the contrast between the literature and the expectation of being surprised from different perspectives – which could as likely happen in India as somewhere else. A non-western anthropologist, therefore, is not a pseudo-European by nature, i.e., someone who adopts the many ways that would make one European. Since the encounter between cultures occurs within the mind of the anthropologist, the principles of ‘mutual interpretation,’ the project of ‘critical

self-awareness,' or, still, "an effort to see in the round what is otherwise flat," is more of a guide than the pursuit of pure otherness. Madan warns: "An excessive emphasis on the otherness of those studied only results in their being made the objects of study rather than its subjects." (Madan 1994: 159).

From Brazil, it is interesting to note that an important event in the trajectory of T.N. Madan receives only discrete commentaries in his book. I refer to the role Madan played in moving the journal *Contributions to Indian Sociology* from Europe to India. This move took place when Louis Dumont (École des Hautes Études) and David Pocock (Oxford), the European founders of the journal in 1957, decided to cease its publication ten years later. Complex negotiations allowed for its rebirth in India, and Madan was the editor of this important journal during the following 25 years, from 1967 to 1992, thereby creating a privileged forum of discussion and debate. The pedagogic, theoretical and political roles carried through the transmigration of *Contributions* from Europe to India are an important legacy of the career of T.N. Madan that only surfaces in *Pathways* as a subtext.

In a similar fashion, an important subtext in *After the Fact* tells of the individual contribution of Geertz to anthropology. Though fearful of the various disciplinary implications, in his individual trajectory Clifford Geertz acknowledges the consequences of being a U.S. citizen ("There are lots of advantages in being the citizen of a superpower in less prominent places, but cultural invisibility is not among them"), as well as of his own notoriety ("... in 1980, when, cited all over the place, my contributions were dissected, resisted, corrected, distorted, celebrated, decried, or built upon ..."). When the author admits that he became a required reference, *After the Fact* ceases being a narrative of an individual career and becomes – whether the author wants or not – a chapter in the history of anthropology. After demonstrating, by means of evidence from his own trajectory, that anthropology has always been in transformation, Geertz is surprised by the current changes: the query that subordinates anthropologists to other specialists (in contrast to the old days when the ethnologist alone dominated the field); the even greater scrutiny by local anthropologists; and the significant increase in the number of specialists in the United States. If previously it was an occupation limited to the few so as to be compared to a tribe, "anthropology has become a sprawling consortium of dissimilar scholars held together largely by will and convenience" (1995: 133). By contrast, T.N.

Madan contests not only the western truths but also those projects couched as native, spontaneous, autonomous or indigenous. For him, these latter terms distort the nature of anthropology and only serve to reinforce the opinion that the appearance of the 'native anthropologist' changes nothing:

The crucial question is not Who is doing anthropology? but What kind of anthropology is being done? A mere change of the stage and the actors will not enable anthropology to be reborn. ... We need to produce a different kind of play under the direction of comprehensive theoretical frameworks, which admit meaning and purpose into our discourse, and which integrate the view from the inside with those from the outside (1994: 138-139).

Two books, two autobiographical assessments; individual stories in one, collective paths in the other. For Geertz, unique occasions do not form part of a discipline; if his biography is constructed of special moments and this is an indication of what occurs amongst specialists, it is possible to derive the conclusion that anthropology reflects "a loose collection of intellectual careers." Madan starts from the very conjunction of intellectual careers, sociologizes the paths, immerses himself in the entanglement of several *theoretical histories*, and, while dispensing with a discussion of the disciplinarity of anthropology, offers his book to readers who sympathize with the idea that "no author is an island complete unto himself; every scholar has predecessors, consociates, and successors."

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### Events and stories

In the coming decade, it is possible that assessments then will reveal how the end of the century was characterized by the return of anthropology to its social point of origin. Research at home will have replaced the canonic ideal of a radical encounter with otherness. "Indeed," remembers Geertz today, "an increasing number of us work on

Western societies, and even our own; a move which simplifies some matters and complicates others" (1995: 132). The awareness that anthropology never completely left home perhaps will be made explicit: that Africa was partially home for the British when they exported the idea of totality to the colonies,<sup>10</sup> and that today a process of selective incorporation legitimizes, in the world metropoleis, specialists from the old anthropological research sites who exhibit a kind of knowledge formerly considered as *native*. A comparison between *Critical Events* (by Veena Das) and *Making PCR* (by Paul Rabinow) reveals how, where in India research must evaluate one's own society *and also* anthropology, in the United States politically committed research has science as its subject matter and anthropology becomes a residual category.

*Critical Events*, by Veena Das, puts together essays on a variety of themes and times: an intellectual debate within anthropology; events of the Partition of India, focusing on the sexual and reproductive violence to which women were subjected; the discourse on cultural rights, the control over memory, and the right of a community to demand heroic death from its members; the violence of Sikh militant discourse; the judicial and medical discourse on victims of the industrial disaster at Bhopal. Veena Das starts from a dual location: the essays identify critical moments in the history of contemporary India and these moments are then redescribed within the framework of anthropological knowledge. The expression "in the history of contemporary India" sheds light on the idea of *events* as critical moments which, beginning with a strategy which intends to avoid giving a privileged status to locality, substitutes space for time and, in this conjuncture, seeks to "de-essentialize" India.

But the book also reconstructs India. In the course of the book, Veena Das unites as 'Indian' the events that occurred between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs; criticizes and reevaluates accepted values of modernity (for example, human rights and the understanding of pain); offers contributions for a change in the Indian metanarrative of the nation-state by questioning the European nation-state model; and warns about the danger of unduly valuing the community as an organic and authentic unity – the community too has its means of oppression. Veena Das's project ends up achieving other objectives as

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<sup>10</sup> The point of view that British anthropologists left England unquestioned was proposed by Anderson 1968, in the context of the spectacular development of anthropology vis-à-vis sociology in that country.

well: for instance, the author shows how various levels (local, national and global) can be simultaneously present in the life of a single individual, making evident the reality of the victims of political violence. The book also proposes the idea of an “anthropology of pain” that, instead of consolidating the authority of the discipline, has as its objective rehabilitating and giving voice to victims of violence.<sup>11</sup> In the process, the author clarifies her own vision of intellectual paths (to use the expression of T.N. Madan, her predecessor as editor of *Contributions to Indian Sociology*) and her insertion in them.

For Veena Das there are at least three kinds of dialogues within the ethnographic or sociological text on India: that with the western traditions of scholarship in the discipline; with the Indian sociologist and anthropologist; and with the ‘informant,’ whose voice is present either as information obtained in the field or as the written texts of the tradition (1995a: 26). These dialogues allow for a clearer understanding of the positioning of the author. In the first place, for Veena Das the informant is a *victim*, to whom voice should be given.<sup>12</sup> The concern of Madan to soften otherness finds its parallel here in the proposal to grant to the informant the status of first person (thus avoiding the third). Veena Das substitutes the metaphor of the ‘gaze,’ which has marked anthropology during this century, for that of ‘voice,’ making explicit the influence in her approach of the post-modern perspective and, by the same token, overcoming the reifying anthropological perspective of a particular ‘vision.’

The way the book is put together reveals a dialogue with Indian colleagues and, in this sense, the choice of dedicating the book to M.N. Srinivas is extremely relevant. Veena Das recovers Srinivas's work in the context of an alliance between Subaltern historians and A.K. Saran, so that all of them, though with diverse approaches, are united in a critique of Louis Dumont. It is Louis Dumont, in the end, who disturbs and causes the most pain in the anthropologist, revealing her vulnerability:

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<sup>11</sup> Tambiah (1996) distinguishes between three approaches to collective violence: the anthropology of the collective aspect of violence; the anthropology of migration processes; and the anthropology of pain. Within this general framework, Das 1995a belongs to the third type.

<sup>12</sup> See, also, Das 1995b. Contrast the place of the *victims* with the *oppressed* in the Indian and the Brazilian cases (Peirano 1981, 1991, 1992).

I reiterate my admiration for [Dumont's] remarkable abilities in bringing together a wide range of materials within a single theoretical frame, but my admiration for his achievements *cannot take away the pain* that an encounter with his formulations entails for an anthropologist who wishes to lay claims to both the resources of the anthropological tradition and the Indian tradition, both of which can act as global traditions or local traditions (1995a: 33, note 5; my emphasis).

It would be simple minded, however, to think that Veena Das allies herself with Indians in opposition to westerners: in addition to an involvement with many post-modernist concerns, it is in Wittgenstein that Veena Das finds inspiration to understand the expression of pain, and, in Durkheim, the interlocutor to help her discern how the sharing of pain can become witness to moral life.<sup>13</sup> Between the sources of western anthropological tradition, on one side, and Indian sources of inspiration, on the other, Veena Das establishes a triangulation with anthropologists “from other peripheral places” and, from this particular location, indicates ways that could pluralize the narratives of the discipline and eliminate the dominant Eurocentrism. A multiplicity of intellectual paths results from this proposal, offering an opportunity to expand the existing dialogue about India and the west. (In terms of social recognition, *Critical Events* was considered the ‘Book of the Year 1995’ in India).

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Changing location to the United States, the situation is quite different. Taking *Making PCR: A Story of Biotechnology* by Paul Rabinow as an example, one does not find here any disclosed interlocutors. If ten years ago so-called post-modern anthropologists were sociologically recognized through their mutual citation, the new book by Paul Rabinow indicates that the era of experiments gelled into a tendency of its own. The consolidation of this tendency is revealed through this critical index: Rabinow does not cite his companions of intellectual adventure. The author presents to his colleagues an acknowledgment and an apology: the credits are at the end of the book, and include those

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<sup>13</sup> For Wittgenstein, the expression "I am in pain" does not describe a mental state — it is a complaint; from Durkheim, Veena Das takes up the discussion on piacular rites.



friends and specialists working in the field of anthropology/history of science; the apology is for not citing their publications in the bibliography that follows. The reader is left to reconstruct, if possible, the debates that the author chooses not to reveal. The *pathways*, here, have been erased. (At only one time an intellectual lineage is established, but the references do not include anthropologists; the reference to Lévi-Strauss comes at the end of the book.)

I regret that it is inappropriate to include more explicit citations to the lively debates of these fields; keen and tolerant readers will find traces abound. I trust that my colleagues will realize that this book seeks a somewhat broader audience, including some who are far less tolerant of the technical language of science studies (1996: 175).<sup>14</sup>

In this text Rabinow examines one of the great inventions of contemporary science: PCR (the polymerase chain reaction) which expanded the capacity of identifying and manipulating genetic material on a previously unimaginable scale. The book includes an analysis of the transformation of the practices and potential of molecular biology, of the institutional context in which the invention occurred and of the principal actors involved: scientists, technicians, and business people. With its provocative subtitle (“A Story of Biotechnology”), it is significant that the ethnography has a classic structure.

The first two chapters present the ecology of the invention through an evaluation of the experimental and conceptual methodology that led to biotechnology, plus an examination of Cetus Corporation during the eighties – the context of the experiments. The (ever noble) third chapter focuses on the process that culminated in the invention, in which experimental milieu and concept were combined (“PCR: Experimental Milieu + the Concept”), while the last two chapters demonstrate that an idea has little value unless it is placed in action. Here, an attempt is made to tell of the development of the concept, the process that gave scientific visibility to PCR, the conflicts amongst members of the team and the negotiations with large corporations.

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<sup>14</sup> See Rabinow 1992 for his reactions to Brazilian colleagues after his visit to the country.

The major innovation in this sober tale is the ethnographic insertion of various interviews throughout the chapters. These conversations (which were reviewed by the interviewees prior to publication) provide a window to the world described by the ethnologist. An academic reader finds many familiar concerns: the evaluation of the disadvantages of the academic world vis-à-vis the industrial one; the means and criteria used to gain research grants; the rules of legitimation and prestige in the industrial-scientific world; the need for public evaluation; the personalities, idiosyncrasies and personal lives of the scientists. Yet an important subtext is in the sequence of the ethnographic construction, which moves from the ecology of science to concept, concept to experimental system, to the development of specific techniques, and, back to the conceptual realm, lands in the *Event*. While revealing the continual motion of experimental science, the book reminds us of anthropological monographs, as well as offers us the conditions for understanding social reproduction in the world of biotechnology.

This is a critical point. *Making PCR*, while presenting a text beginning with a *story*, reveals its classical anthropological inspiration in the gerund of the title. The end is a kind of beginning: *Event* – with no article. Thus the book may be seen as an effort of an experiment made in the United States of today, at home, with both science transformed into subject matter and the appropriation of the canonical tradition (though the solitude of the fieldworker here surfaces only in the genre of the text). Rabinow is faced with biotechnology's hallmark: its potential to get away from nature, and to construct artificial conditions in which specific variables can be manipulated. For the anthropologist, brought up in the duality of culture and nature, it comes as a puzzle to confront a situation in which such kind of knowledge as biotechnology “forms the basis for remaking nature according to our norms” (1996: 20). Doubly at home, Rabinow reveals his initial motivation:

I was often intrigued by, but skeptical of, the claims of miraculous knowledge made possible by new technologies supposedly ushering in a new era in the understanding of life and unrivaled prospects for the improvement of health. The weekly *New York Times* science pages rarely failed to announce that every new discovery or technical advance ‘could well lead to a cure for cancer or AIDS’ (1996: 2).

Here it is noble science, with magical promises, that perk the interest of the researcher. In the process of bringing anthropology back home, ethnography of science becomes a critique of post-modernity – thus fulfilling the Durkheimian project, yet affirming the choice as political. In the process, Rabinow also reinforces other canonic aspects of anthropology: that, even at home, the ethnologist needs to learn another language (in his case, that of molecular biology), during a long period of socialization, and, as always, to face “the problem of who has the authority – and responsibility – to represent experience and knowledge” (1996: 17).

In this context, it is curious that the book does *not* cite the monograph on high energy physics that Traweek (1988) published in the United States, for instance.<sup>15</sup> Opting for a particular dialogue with a distant *classic*, the book opens and closes with a discussion of “Science as vocation”: the movement of getting distance at/from home perhaps requires the legitimation that Weber gives to the project, with the bonus of the peculiarity given to the United States.<sup>16</sup> The way Lévi-Strauss makes his appearance is also unique: not only because he is the only anthropologist cited, but also because it is in *bricolage* and the *mouvement incident* that the story of biotechnology is transformed, in the last pages of the book, into *Event*. Rabinow shows how, in biotechnology, a movement exists which allows concepts to produce new phenomena through new contextualizations, thereby generating new inventions. By neglecting that the same process occurs in anthropology, here there is an anthropologist but, as in Geertz's *After the Fact*, there is not necessarily an anthropology. (It is revealing, though not surprising, that in U.S. bookstores Rabinow's book is not to be found in anthropology or cultural studies, but in the shelves of the section of Science).

## 6

### “Ce qui est donné”

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<sup>15</sup> Traweek is the first on the list of Rabinow's acknowledgements, yet her book is not cited. Traweek, who also opted for a classic monographic construction to deal with accelerators and physicists, years later showed she was disappointed because readers did not perceive her book as an ‘ironic’ counterpoint to Evans-Pritchard (Traweek 1992: 436).

<sup>16</sup> Taken from “Science as vocation”, the epigraph is as follows: “Permit me to take you once more to America, because there one can often observe such matters in their most massive and original shape.”

A 'book of the year,' an invention of 'science'; events that are history, a story that ends up as Event – these are the varied ways in which anthropology can emerge in different places in the contemporary world. Sometimes, arranged in intellectual paths; other times, presenting biographical mininarratives that do not acknowledge disciplinary lineages. Thus, how is one to situate oneself amongst the various options for theoretical-ethnographic construction?

In this exercise, in which the publishing of four books became events in themselves, the delimiting of the narrative and the crucial ethnographic moment were, as always, central problems: Veena Das discovered critical moments through questioning totalizing views and assumed the role of a listener more than an observer; Paul Rabinow told the story of a scientific invention – but included interviews which turned the protagonists into co-authors of the narrative. The events of Veena Das are Indian: they are socially critical in the history of the subcontinent, and the author inserts herself in the intellectual paths that include multiple interlocutors – Europeans, Indians, Brazilians. The story of biotechnology of Paul Rabinow does not offer evidence of the lineages of which he is a part; it deals with an Event of global consequences. The author dispenses with a dialogue with colleagues, choosing as his principal interlocutors classic authors who, in the context of a book that avoids disciplinary definitions, maintains the privilege of distance in time and space.

The story thus repeats itself, though not in the same way: Geertz could do without predecessors in the name of a unique biographical trajectory, while Madan defined them in order to indicate his own search; Geertz moved through institutions and fieldwork sites with a mobility that, in symbolic terms, embraced the world, while Madan defined his location in India but included a lineage that knew no bounds: for the political/geographic world of Geertz, Madan countered with a world made of intellectual paths. Rabinow encountered his Event in universal science, Veena Das defined her plural events socially and historically in India; Rabinow wanted to know more about the social processes that great scientific discoveries hide, Veena Das was interested in the limits of suffering of victims of collective life – including the suffering which result from great discoveries.

From India or the United States, of one generation or another, all produced narratives that are legitimate for the international community of specialists. One reason why this was possible may be seen in their placing themselves within certain *theoretical histories*: in favor or against, accepting or denying them, with links or autonomously, theoretical histories were always present. If Veena Das showed her uneasiness in relation to Louis Dumont, Paul Rabinow, even while avoiding lineages, found the savage mind of Lévi-Strauss in a large industrial corporation. And if her political commitment brought Das to analyze critical events from a multicentered perspective, that of Rabinow brought him to tell a story of science in which he was included as the narrator. Veena Das elected Durkheim; Rabinow chose Weber.

For the anthropologist, produced and fed by fieldwork, the articulation of lived experiences in which s/he is a participant or which are rediscovered as document or memory (of diverse natures, milieux, scopes and dominions), need not only a textual anchor, but also a cognitive and psychic one that encompasses the experiences. The appropriation of the 'ephemeral moment' or the 'revealing incident' has in the experiences of the discipline the exemplary cases that brought Mauss, upon analyzing the *kula* and the *potlatch*, to express his concerns as such:

Les historiens sentent et objectent à juste titre que les sociologues font trop d'abstractions et séparent trop les divers éléments des sociétés les uns des autres. Il faut faire comme eux: observer *ce qui est donné*. Or, le donné, c'est Rome, c'est Athènes, c'est le Français moyen, c'est le Mélanésien de telle ou telle île, et non pas la prière ou le droit en soi. (1925: 182; my emphasis)

Thus, data is constructed, facts are made. It is Geertz himself who recalls the etymology *factum, factus, facere* (1995: 62). Yet the ethnographic fact mixes time and space. Whether seen as events retold in the text (Das), or as textual stories (Rabinow), what is really at stake is the choice of the best angle for constructing "that which is given" – *ce qui est donné*. Whatever the options – modern or post-modern – theoretical-political

implications are always at stake, whether acknowledged or not.<sup>17</sup> Stories for some, events and paths for others, these alternatives reinforce the presence of a theoretical and political insertion of the authors, in a realm of what can be alluded to as ‘the politics of theory.’

Max Weber acknowledged, as did Mauss, the need for delimiting and resolving concrete problems as against the tendency of producing “dilettantism adorned with philosophy” (1965: 220). For Weber, just as with anthropologists today, it was by tackling problems generated by facts, and not purely epistemological and methodological reflections, that a science progressed. (This is but one more of the many points of discussion that flow from the preceding comparisons and which, while fascinating, can only be mentioned here).

## 7

### Back to U.S. bookstores

Today, when a reader looks for anthropology books only on the shelves of this specific area in U.S. bookstores, s/he is limited to a normal science style. In this section are the books considered to be classics and, among the recent publications, only those which maintain a stable definition of anthropology. Thus, one will generally find books by canonic authors, such as Malinowski, Boas, Margaret Mead, Evans-Pritchard, Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss; recent essay collections on consecrated topics (such as ritual, religion, ethnography); monographs on indigenous societies – irrespective of their theoretical orientation; and not-so-recent books by celebrated authors who have been legitimated as ‘anthropologists’ (examples range from Mary Douglas, to Jack Goody, and also Clifford Geertz).

In terms of the books examined here, where is contemporary anthropology? With respect to many new publications, it migrated to the area of ‘studies.’ Or, also, to philosophy, cognitive science or, purely, Science – this being the case of Paul Rabinow. But new books can also be found in specialized sections of geographic areas that, in dividing up the world (Asia/Pacific, Latin America, Middle East, etc.), encompass a

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<sup>17</sup> See Ahmad 1993: 175: "Our texts that appear to be (sometimes even claim to be) products of what was once called ‘theoretical practice’ are saturated with what *we* are, our *times* are, our *world* is – so that the best of our theories need to be examined in terms of their irreducible situatedness."

certain political cosmology. These varied places where anthropological production finds a home – corroborating the multi-sited nature of the discipline in the United States – poses a central question: the exoticism of anthropology. Today, in pretending to disclaim this association, much of anthropologically inspired studies are no longer ‘anthropology’: though anthropologists exist, the discipline has lost its validation. Yet, it is precisely in this process that, paradoxically, exoticism becomes its structuring principle.

A visit to bookstores confirms that the discipline remains so tied to exoticism (despite efforts to the contrary by anthropologists) that not even the intellectual market is able to achieve a relativistic perspective. The path seems to follow these steps: since anthropology is (still/ever) the study of the ‘exotic other,’ in the nineties this approach is no longer politically acceptable, the result being that the focus is turned back on us – that is, to nearby otherness. But for academic bookstores in the United States, at this moment these studies are no longer anthropology; the books are transformed into cultural studies, feminist studies, area studies. The result is predictable: if anthropology *was* the study of the exotic other, and we must distance ourselves from exoticism, by denying the fact that new studies are anthropological, anthropology becomes definitively associated with exoticism. In this process, the force of the essentialist (and hence, ahistorical) vision reveals itself: either anthropology is a *disciplined* matter, that is, always the same, or it disappears.

It would be simplistic, though, to maintain the notion of a hegemonic and isolated U.S. intellectual milieu that establishes the categories into which the rest of the world must fit. A significant fact must be mentioned in this context: the massive presence of non-western authors in the intellectual and academic world of the United States today. The four books analyzed present a clear example of this change and, though T.N. Madan and Veena Das are not readily found in bookstores, what-is-left-of anthropology needs to admit into its ranks authors who were once natives – including for them a role in the crusade against the exoticizing definition. The grouping of works by these authors who were absorbed by the market reveals specific courses.

I borrow the idea of *intensification* from Louis Dumont. In order to elucidate the hybrid character of modern acculturations, Dumont (1994) shows how transplanted notions become *intensified* when compared with their place of origin – whether in peripheral tendencies or in the very hegemonic and dominant configuration. With regards to the books in question, this mechanism occurs through slippages of meaning: for instance,

even with the subtitle “An anthropological perspective on contemporary India,” *Critical Events* could not be accepted as anthropology; a (native) anthropologist who studies her own society is not an anthropologist, but a ‘sociologist.’ For having a double alterity (in this case, India and anthropology), the book slides to ‘sociology’ – not a very favorable placement, by the way, in this moment when the disciplines are being questioned.<sup>18</sup>

Here in Brazil, as much as I believe they are in India, the books *After the Fact*, *Pathways*, *Critical Events* and *Making PCR* would be identified as anthropology, just as Geertz, Madan, Das and Rabinow are recognized as anthropologists. In these contexts, the disciplinary pulverization that today marks the area of the human sciences in the United States does not occur. In India and Brazil, internal mechanisms of acculturation domesticated – well before it occurred in the United States – otherness *at home*. One could think that, surrounded in the ‘center,’ anthropology thrives in certain ‘margins,’ or, if it does not thrive, at least it offers a positive, critical and constructive approach. If the modern world has been constituted by processes of acculturation, this is one of its ironic aspects.

The place of origin of authors is another situation related to exoticism. Here the specific fact to point to is that, coming from diverse areas and written oftentimes from divergent theoretical orientations, in the United States many contemporary books by foreign authors are put together under the cultural studies label. Being well defined in their places of origin as, from India for instance, subaltern studies, literary criticism, and even anthropology, when they take root in the United States, their distinctive characteristics are lost. Once again, the generic designation of cultural studies reveals a current tendency to fragment intellectual fields only to later reunite them as analogous, thereby eliminating their historical particularities in the name of a shared post-modernity.<sup>19</sup> Today, as always, the old question of otherness, both in bookstores and elsewhere, does not have an adequate (re)solution.

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<sup>18</sup> Brazilian literature receives a similar treatment: Candido 1995, on literature and society, was classified as sociology; however, Viveiros de Castro 1992, on the cosmology of Araweté Indians, may be found on the shelf of anthropology.

<sup>19</sup> This phenomenon is similar to Ahmad’s (1995) view in relationship to ‘postcolonialism’: “It is only when the Angel of History casts its glance back at Asian and African societies from its location in Europe and North America, or when it flies across the skies of the world on the wings of postmodern travel and telecommunication, that those societies look like so many variants of a postcolonial sameness” (:28).



### An agenda for reflection

The new hybrid representations generated by the encounter with the dominant European culture/civilization constituted, during this century, diverse species of syntheses, more or less radical, from two tendencies: on the one hand, the ideas and values of autochthonous and holistic inspiration; on the other, the ideas and values stemming from the modern individualist configuration. These encounters generate permanent and precise processes of acculturation and intensification: the more modern civilization is spread throughout the world, the more its configuration is modified by the incorporation of hybrid products, making it more powerful and, at the same time, modifying it through the permanent mix of distinct values (Dumont 1994).

A similar phenomenon befalls social scientists, who have, at least, a double and solidary insertion: on the one hand, they are members of a transnational community that shares certain values, codes, expectations, rituals, and, equally important, *classics*, from which it derives its universal character; on the other, they are political individuals whose socialization/social identity is tied to a specific nationality – one is Indian, Brazilian, Australian, French –, revealing particular traits. In some cases, these are combined with a civilizational identity (as in the South-Asian case); in others, hegemony is the encompassing value (as in 'American,' for example). From Max Weber to Norbert Elias, the links and relative autonomy vis-à-vis the national idea were questioned and evaluated (Weber 1946; Elias 1971). Just as with other phenomena, these are questions that should be approached from a comparative perspective. I conclude, thus, by delineating certain dimensions that were present in the cases examined, which can serve as the basis for an agenda for reflection.

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The comparison between diverse trends in anthropology is a serious and urgent project. Seized by ideals of objectivity and universalism which are in fact parochial, by subjective notions of knowledge which result in indigent relativisms, and by militant

declarations which shelter shallow political commitments, communication between anthropologists needs a broad agreement (in the epigraph by Vincent Crapanzano, 'a fully governing convention') and, at the same time, the political force that flows from the alliance of multiple interests and perspectives (as in Fischer's). In this context, it is worth remembering how in the books examined, whether from the United States or India, the recognition of certain *classics* was simultaneously reaffirmed with the privileged status given to fieldwork. This process indicates that, in anthropology, the idea of theory as a (Peircean) Third can dispense with a stable and well-defined conceptual base, attributing this function to predecessors and, as a consequence, to ethnography, and both, predecessors and ethnography, allowing for the history of anthropology to be transformed into a multiplicity of *theoretical histories*. Thus, no matter how much questioned and criticized, it is the acceptance of theoretical histories that finally makes feasible the pretensions of an egalitarian dialogue among anthropologists of different origins and orientations (we all have the same monographs in our private libraries; field anecdotes are socially shared; similar ethnographical stories are used as productive metaphors).

But one must go further, and differences as much as similarities must be confronted. Despite the fact that anthropologists, like their fellow subjects, are also culture bound and themselves part of larger communities, some basic claims must be considered: i) that academic knowledge is relatively autonomous from its immediate contexts of production, and may thus prompt desirable levels of communication; ii) that comparison, rather than superficial homogenization, may sustain hopes for more truly pluralist universalisms; iii) if forms of anthropology emerge under different labels in specific contexts, neighboring disciplines must be considered, be them models or rivals, heirs or predecessors; iv) finally, that local (which oftentimes are 'national') intellectual traditions, where current practices of anthropology are embedded, must be pondered. This includes, of course, previous lendings and borrowings as well as earlier political commitments.

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