

# Waiting for Foucault, Still

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*Being After-Dinner Entertainment by Marshall Sablins  
for the Fourth Decennial Conference of the Association of  
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Lord Jenkins, Professor Strathern, Dear  
Colleagues...and other Colleagues:

I have been charged by Professor Strathern with  
providing “after-dinner entertainment” in thirty  
minutes or less, presumably so that you will not be  
found sleeping when Professor Stocking delivers his

Huxley Lecture. I don't know what I have done to deserve this high academic honor, still less how to live up to it, except that like many of you I keep a notebook of underground observations, ranging from one-liners to many-pagers, from which I thought to offer you a selection of curmudgeonly remarks on what's up nowadays in Anthropology and probably shouldn't be. At the outset, however, I have to confess that in looking over my notebook it struck me that Lord Keynes didn't tell the whole story about the long run. At least as far as Anthropology goes, two things are certain in the long run: one is that we'll all be dead; but another is that we'll all be wrong. Clearly, a good scholarly career is where the first comes before the second. Another thing that struck me, and helped inspire my lecture title, was that this notebook was a lot like Michel Foucault's sense of power—poly-amorphous perverse. So it is in that post-structuralist spirit that I offer the following *pasticherie* for your dessert.

## The Invention of Tradition

Since Britain is the homeland of “the invention of tradition” I hardly need to explain the phrase. You also know that anthropologists have rushed to adapt the idea to the current nostalgia for culture amongst the erstwhile colonial peoples. The third- and fourth-world over, people are proclaiming the values of their traditional customs (as they conceive them). Unfortunately a scholarly air of inauthenticity hangs over this modern culture movement. The academic label “invention” already suggests contrivance, and the anthropological literature too often conveys the sense of a more or less counterfeit past, drummed up for political effects, which probably owes more to imperialist forces than to indigenous sources. As a possible antidote, I call your attention to a remarkable invention of tradition, whose respectability no Western scholar will be tempted to deny.

For it happens that in the 15th and 16th centuries a bunch of indigenous intellectuals and artists in Europe got together and began inventing their traditions and themselves by attempting to revive the learning of an ancient culture which they claimed to be the achievement of their ancestors but which they did not fully understand, as for many centuries this culture had been lost and its languages (Latin and Greek) had been corrupted or forgotten.

For centuries also these Europeans had been converted to Christianity, but this did not prevent them from now calling for the restoration of their pagan heritage. They would once again practice the classical virtues, even invoke the pagan gods. All the same, under the circumstances—the great distance of the acculturated intellectuals from a past that was effectively irrecoverable—under the circumstances, nostalgia was not what it used to be. The texts and monuments they constructed were often ersatz facsimiles of classical models. They created a self-conscious tradition of fixed and essentialized canons. They wrote history in the style of Livy, verses in a mannered Latin, tragedy according to Seneca and comedy according to Terence; they decorated Christian churches with the facades of classical temples and generally followed the precepts of Roman architecture as set down by Vitruvius—without realizing these precepts were Greek. All this came to be called the Renaissance in European history, because it gave birth to “modern civilization.”

What else can one say about it, except that some people have all the historical luck? When Europeans invent their traditions—with the Turks at the gates—it is a genuine cultural rebirth, the beginnings of a progressive future. When other peoples do it, it is a sign of cultural decadence, a factitious recuperation, which can only bring forth the simulacra of a dead past.

On the other hand, the historical lesson could be that all is not lost. (*Journal of Modern History*, Spring 1993)

## On Materialism

Materialism must be a form of idealism, since it's wrong—too.

## Heraclitus vs. Herodotus

One of the current arguments against the coherence of cultures and the possibility of doing any kind of systematic ethnography is that, like a certain famous philosophical river, cultures are always changing. Such is the flux that one can never step in the same culture twice. Yet unless identity and consistency were symbolically imposed on social practices, as also on rivers, and not only by anthropologists but by the people, there could be no intelligibility or even sanity, let alone a society. So to paraphrase John Barth, reality is a nice place to visit (philosophically), but no one ever lived there.

## Post-Structuralism

This is a modern American folk-tale to the same effect: Three umpires of major league baseball were debating how to call balls and strikes, “I calls ‘em the way they is,” the first said. “Me,” said the second, “I calls ‘em the way I sees ‘em.” “Naw,” declared the third, who had been around the longest, “they ain’t nothin’ till I calls ‘em.”

Technically, according to the *Cours de gymnastique générale*, this is known as the “arbitrary character of the umpires sign”. Whence comes the post-structuralist dictum, “Don’t be Saussure.” (Eric Hamp)

Item: *Chicago Tribune*, May 23, 1993: Jim Lefebvre became the first manager ejected in the history of Joe Robbie Stadium with Friday night’s incident. Plate umpire Ed Rapuano did the deed after Lefebvre protested a called third strike on Sammy Sosa. “The ball was down”, said Lefebvre...“When he kicked me out, he said ‘I don’t care where the pitch was.’ He doesn’t care where the pitch was? Big-league umpire!”

## Japanese Culture is Always Changing

A Japanese friend said of the famous imperial shrine at Ise that it is unchanged since the 7th century, the same as it was when it was first built. Of course, it doesn’t look that old to Westerners. But according to the current tradition, the buildings at Ise have been rebuilt (in alternating sites) every twenty years in exactly the same way—using the same ancient instruments and the same materials—with each step of the process marked by the appropriate ancient rituals. Of course, the instruments couldn’t be exactly the same, could they? They haven’t lasted for thirteen centuries. And what does it mean to say the materials are the same, since new wood is used each time? And are two ritual performances ever “the same”?

(In fact, the rebuilding cycle was once interrupted for more than 150 years, and the buildings and tools have seen some changes. But that is not the dominant Japanese tradition or perception. The tradition is that they are unchanged and the perception is they are the same.)

One Western art critic explains that the rebuilt buildings are not “replicas” but “Ise re-created.”

Perhaps something close to the Shinto conception, since nature is indeed involved, would be our concept of the continuity of a forest: the Amazon forest could be in existence for centuries or millennia, even though every one of the original trees is gone, has been replaced many times. In any case, it is obvious that identity is a relative construction, based on a selective valuation of similarities and differences. At Ise, it is irrelevant that the materials have been renewed—thus to Western eyes “not the same”—so long as they are of the same type and put together under the ancient ritual and technical regime. By such criteria, what we call Tinturn Abbey could not pass under that name, the age and “authenticity” of the stones notwithstanding. It would not be Tinturn Abbey, because it is a ruin.

In his life of Theseus, Plutarch tells the following story about the ship on which the hero returned to Athens after slaying the Minotaur: The thirty-oared galley in which Theseus sailed with the youths and returned safely was preserved by the Athenians down to the time of Demetrius of Phalerum (317–307 BC). At intervals they removed the old timbers and replaced them with sound ones, so that the ship became a classic illustration for the philosophers of the disputed question of growth and change, some of them arguing that it remained the same, and others that it had become a different vessel.

And what should we make of the popular observation that “culture is always changing”?

## Etics and Emics

All etics or languages of objective scientific description (so-called) are based on a grid of meaningful or emic distinctions. Take the international phonetic alphabet, by means of which the significant sounds of any language can be “objectively” recorded and reproduced. The phonetic alphabet is made up of all known phonemic distinctions: of all differences in sound-segments known to signify differences in meaning in the natural languages of the world. So in principle the objective description of any language consists of its comparison with the meaningful order of all other languages.

The same for ethnography. No good ethnography is self-contained. Implicitly or explicitly ethnography is an act of comparison. By virtue of comparison ethnographic description becomes objective. Not in the naive positivist sense of an unmediated perception—just the opposite: it becomes a universal understanding to the extent it brings to bear on the perception of any society the conceptions of all the others. Some Cultural Studies types—Cult Studs, in Tom Frank’s description—seem to think that Anthropology is nothing but ethnography. Better the other way around: ethnography is Anthropology, or it is nothing.

## The Poetics of Culture, I

Anthropologists wanted. No experience actually necessary. Make more than most poets.



## The Poetics of Culture, II

In speaking of culture as a superorganic order, in which individuals counted for next to nothing, A.L. Kroeber liked to use the metaphor of a coral reef: a vast edifice built by tiny microorganisms each of which, acting simply according to its own nature, secretes an imperceptible addition to this structure whose scale and organization by far transcends it. Just so in culture:

Lives of great men all remind us  
 We can make our lives sublime,  
 And in passing leave behind us...  
 A small deposit of lime.

## “The Pseudo-Politics of Interpretation” (Gerald Graff)

In a recent issue of the vanguard journal *Cultural Anthropology* a certain cultural relativism was dismissed as (I quote) “politically unacceptable.” Similarly, a summary comment to a recent book of essays on Polynesian history warns that Geertz’s *Negara* and Sahlins’s Polynesian works, by their attempts to understand history in such terms as culture or structure afflict the study of others with “dangerous” notions: that is, essentializing notions that falsely endow a people with eternal cultural qualities, or overvalue hegemonic ideologies by neglecting “the politically fractured and contested character of culture.” Dangerous? Hopefully the day is not far off when this kind of terrorism will seem patently lunatic. In the meantime, however, the best intellectual argument is the moral-political high ground. To know what other peoples are, it suffices to take the proper attitudes toward sexism, racism and colonialism. As if their truth was our right-mindedness. Or as if the cultural values of other times and places, the events they organized and the people responsible for them, were fashioned in order to answer to whatever has been troubling us lately. But (I paraphrase Herder) these people did not

suffer and die just to manure our little academic fields.

And surely it is a cruel post-modernist fate that requires the ethnographer to celebrate the counter-hegemonic diversity of other people's discourses—the famous polyphony or heteroglossia—while at the same time he or she is forced to confess that shis own scholarly voice is the stereotypic expression of a totalized system of power. It seems that imperialism is the last of the old-time cultural systems. Ours is the only culture that has escaped deconstruction by the changing of the avant garde, as it retains its essentialized and monolithic character as a system of domination. So anthropologists can do nothing but reproduce it. Advanced criticism thus becomes the last refuge of the idea that the individual is the tool of shis culture. Which also proves that those who are ignorant of their own functionalism are destined to repeat it—the second time as farce.

## Utilitarianism

A people who conceive life to be the pursuit of happiness must be chronically unhappy.

## In Adam (Smith)'s Fall, Sinned We All

The punishment was the crime. By disobeying God to satisfy his own desires, by putting this love of self before the love of Him alone that could suffice, man was condemned to become the slave of insatiable bodily desires: a limited and ignorant creature abandoned in an intractable and merely material world to labor, to suffer, and then to die. Made up of “thorns and thistles,” resistant to our efforts, the world, said Augustine, “does not make good what it promises: it is a liar and deceiveth.” The deception consists in the impossibility of assuaging our libidinous desires for earthly goods, for domination and for carnal pleasures. So man is fated “to pursue one thing after another, and nothing remains permanently with him...his needs are so multiplied that he cannot find the one thing needful, a simple and unchanging nature.”

But God was merciful. He gave us Economics. By Adam Smith's time, human misery had been transformed into the positive science of how to make do with our eternal insufficiencies: how to derive the most possible satisfaction from means that are always less than our wants. It was the same Judeo-Christian Anthropology, only bourgeoisified, and on

the whole a somewhat more encouraging prospectus on the same investment opportunities afforded by human suffering. In a famous essay setting out the field, Lionel Robbins explicitly recognized that the genesis of Economics was the economics of Genesis. “We have been turned out of Paradise,” he wrote, “we have neither eternal life nor unlimited means of satisfaction”—instead, a life of scarcity, wherein to choose one good thing is to deprive oneself of another. The real reason Economics is dismal is that it is the science of the post-lapsarian condition. And the Economic Man inhabiting page one of (any) *General Principles of Economics* textbook is Adam.

## The Poetics of Culture, III

*Power, power everywhere,  
And how the signs do shrink.  
Power, power everywhere,  
And nothing else to think.*

The current Foucauldian-Gramscian-Nietzschean obsession with power is the latest incarnation of Anthropology's incurable functionalism. Like its structural-functional and utilitarian predecessors, hegemonizing is homogenizing: the dissolution of specific cultural forms into generic instrumental effects. It used to be that what you had to know about prescriptive joking relations—their “*raison d'être*” *même*—was their contribution to maintaining social order, even as totemic ceremonies or garden magicians were organizing food production. Now, however, “power,” is the intellectual black hole into which all kinds of cultural contents get sucked, if before it was “social solidarity” or “material advantage.” Again and again, we make this lousy bargain with the ethnographic realities, giving up what we know about them in order to understand them. As Sartre said of a certain vulgar Marxism, we are impelled to take the real content of a thought or an act as a mere appearance, and having dissolved this particular in a universal (here economic interest), we take satisfaction in believing we have reduced

appearance to truth. Max Weber, criticizing certain utilitarian explanations of religious phenomena, observed that just because an institution may be relevant to the economy does not mean it is economically determined. But following Gramsci and Foucault, the current neo-functionalism of power seems even more complete: as if everything that could be relevant to power were power.

Quite wondrous, then, is the variety of things anthropologists can now explain by power and resistance, hegemony and counter-hegemony. I say “explain” because the argument consists entirely of categorizing the cultural form at issue in terms of domination, as if that accounts for it. Here are some examples from the past few years of *American Ethnologist* and *Cultured (Cultural) Anthropology*:

1. Nicknames in Naples: “a discourse practice used to construct a particular representation of the social world, [nicknaming] may become a mechanism for reinforcing the hegemony of nationally dominant groups over local groups that threaten the reproduction of social power” [Boo; you never know what's in a nickname!].
2. Bedouin lyric poetry: this is counter-hegemonic [Yeah!].
3. Women's fashions in La Paz: counter-hegemonic

[Yeah!].

4. The social categorization of freed Dominican slaves as “peasants”: hegemonic [Boo].
5. The fiesta system of the Andes in the colonial period: hegemonic.
6. The constructed “spirituality” of middle-class Bengali women, as expressed in diet and dress: hegemonic nationalism and patriarchy.
7. Certain Vietnamese pronouns: hegemonic.
8. Funeral wailing of Warao Indians, Venezuela: counter-hegemonic.
9. Do-it-yourself house building of Brazilian workers: an apparent counter-hegemony that introduces a worse hegemony.
10. The scatological horseplay of unemployed Mexican-American working class males: “an oppositional break in the alienating hegemony of the dominant culture and society.”
11. Common sense: “common sense thought and feeling need not tranquilize a restive population but can incite violent, if contained, rebellion.”

12. The concept of culture as a seamless whole and of society as a bounded entity: hegemonic ideas that have “effectively masked human misery and quenched dissenting voices” [quenched? Give us then your tired and your thirsty].

“A hyper-inflation of significance” would be another way of describing the new functionalism, translating the apparently trivial into the fatefully political by a rhetoric that typically reads like a dictionary of trendy names and concepts, many of them French, a veritable *La Ruse* of postmodernism. Of course the effect, rather than amplifying the significance of Neapolitan nicknames or Vietnamese pronouns, is to trivialize such terms as “domination,” “resistance,” “colonization,” even “violence” and “power.” Deprived of real-political reference, these words become pure values, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing...but the speaker.

## Courses for Our Times

A colleague at the University of Chicago, expert in material culture, offered a course on “Chicago Blues,” under the general heading “The Intensive Study of a Culture,” a portmanteau rubric for undergraduate courses devoted to the presentation of recent ethnographic research. I was prompted to put the following notice on the departmental bulletin board, thinking if Chicago Blues was a culture, Michigan football could also be one—that I have done intensive research in.

### INTENSIVE STUDY OF A CULTURE: MICHIGAN FOOTBALL

Anthropology 21215  
Saturday, 1:30 - 4:30 pm  
Extra Credit for New Year’s Day  
Instructor: Marshall Sahlins

Anthropology 21215. Intensive Study of a Culture: Michigan Football. *PQ: Undergraduates only; limit of 10.* Because of the impossibility of pure presence, the course materials will consist of video transmissions—considered however in their textuality. There can be no pretence of a totalized or master narrative of Michigan football, only a consideration of certain aporias of the Power-I formation—which is to say, of postmodern subjectivity. Selected topics include: trash-talking or contested discourses; tight ends, spread formations and other subject positions; post Gerry-Fordism or de-center subject; post-deconstruction

and other victory celebrations; and the helmet essentialism. *M. Sahlins. 1:30-4:30 Sat, extra credit for New Year’s Day.*

But that was not the funny thing. The funny thing was how many students, including graduate students, took it seriously, believed there really was such a course, and e-mailed asking to sign up for it. One person wondered if I could employ him as a teaching assistant. After the quarter was over, another four people asked how the course went. Scary!

## Relevance

I don't know about Britain, but in America many graduate students in Anthropology are totally uninterested in other times and places. They say we should study our own current problems, all other ethnography being impossible anyhow, as it is just our "construction of the other."

So if they get their way, and this becomes the principle of anthropological research, fifty years hence no one will pay the slightest attention to the work they're doing now. Maybe they're onto something.

## Polyphony is not Cacophony (for Maurice Bloch)

Malama Meleisea tells of taking down two completely different and conflicting stories about the history of certain Samoan chiefs from the lips of one and the same matai (chiefly title holder). When confronted with the discrepancies, the matai reminded Meleisea that he held titles in two different villages, and if Malama would recall he told the first story in one village and the second in the other. So obviously he was speaking as one chief the first time and as a rival chief the second. And what was so inconsistent about that? One is reminded of the Cartesian dictum about clear and distinct ideas—I mean Hocartesian, of course, not to be mistaken for the essentialist doctrines of Descartes—the Cartesian dictum that in Fiji two contradictory statements are not necessarily inconsistent. "They appear to us contradictory," Hocart said, "because we do not know, without much experience, the point of view from which each is made."

But we are not likely to hear an end soon to post-structuralist litanies about the contested and unstable character of cultural logics: about perceptions and meanings that are different for men and women, chiefs and commoners, rich and poor, old

and young, this village and that, yesterday and today—as if a difference were necessarily a disorder. All the same, not everything in the contest is contested (which also proves we come here to paraphrase Durkheim, not to bury him). As polyphonic or heteroglossic as the monograph may be one does not find a Japanese voice in a Sioux Indian ethnography. In order for the categories to be contested at all, there must be a common system of intelligibility, extending to the grounds, means, modes and issues of disagreement. The differences at issue, moreover, entail some relationship. All the more so if they are subversive and thus express the positional values and interests of speakers in a certain social-political order. As Cassierer says in another context, “an awareness of a difference is an awareness of a connection.”

The alternative is to suppose that what people say is arbitrary and aleatory from the point of view of their social existence—in which case, it is true, there could be nothing like anthropological knowledge, or for that matter a social existence. But if in regard to some given event or phenomenon, the women of a community say one thing and the men another, does not the difference in what they are saying express social differences in the construction of gender: their discrepant positions in, and experience of, a certain social universe? If so, there is a non-contradictory way—dare one say, a totalizing way?—of

describing the discrepancy. There is some system in and of the differences. Bakhtin did not for a minute suppose that the presence of dissenting voices was unsystematic. What he said was that in combination with the authoritative discourse, such heteroglossia produced a more complex system.



## Culture as a Metaphysical Pseudo-Entity

Some grave conclusions have been drawn from the fact that anthropologists cannot agree on what “culture” is, the most serious being that the culture concept is an artifact of a certain historical period, logically incoherent and “loaded willy nilly with ideological baggage and unconscious associations peculiar to particular sets of historical circumstances” (Christopher Herbert). Something as bad as that, one would think, ought to be dumped as soon as possible.

And should we not do the same with money? “Money” is a totally elusive concept—even harder to hold onto, I think, than “culture.” Economists and economic historians cannot agree on a definition of money. The differences among them on the nature of money make the Kroeber-Kluckhohn collection of culture-definitions seem like an enviable consensus. And matters get even worse when we interview the natives.

In practice, “money” is a specious notion if ever there was one, a contested category without determinate bounds or content. Rich and poor, old and young, men and women, clergy and laity, poets and

scientists, psychoanalysts and sane people: all have so many irreconcilable opinions about whether money is good or bad, about what it can or cannot buy, whether or not it can make you happy, how it is related to love, politics, beauty, justice, friendship, the human soul, and whatnot.

A lot of people, mostly people without a lot of money, say that money can’t buy everything. Especially it can’t buy happiness: people with 25 million, for example, are not perceptibly happier than people with 24; and besides, rich people are generally unhappy. Still the rich have many consolations, as Plato observed—the chief among them presumably being their money. And despite the fortitude it takes for the rich to endure their disadvantages (Rex Stout), most modern philosophers agree that money is better than poverty—“if only for financial reasons,” as Woody Allen speculates. This conclusion has also been persuasively argued on controlled empirical grounds by Sophie Tucker: “I’ve been rich and I’ve been poor; rich is better.”

Some deep epistemological uncertainties likewise attend the argument that money can’t buy knowledge, a proposition that the educational costs and outputs of American private universities make excruciatingly problematic. A modern Jewish proverb, however, has it that although money won’t make you

a physicist, it does help you like reality.

The Christian pecuniary theology, incidentally, is another heteroglossic nightmare. New Testament views about the relation between evil and the love of money are well known, but there is more than a suggestion of heresy in the popular paraphrase that “the want of money is the root of all evil.”

Regarding Abe Lincoln’s observation that “God must love the poor or He wouldn’t have made so many of them,” H.L. Mencken replied, “He must love the rich or he wouldn’t divide so much mazuma among so few of them.”

All this suggests that money is a prototypical fuzzy category. Ever subject to conflicting discourses, the concept of money is constantly being undermined by a politics of interpretation in which hegemonic norms are challenged by dissenting voices. It follows that the meaning of money in relation to other things, the Saussurean value of the category, is always shifting. Consider the categorical entanglements of “money” and “sex.” When we say that someone is well-fixed or well-endowed, what exactly are we talking about? The ambiguities are succinctly summed up by Zsa Zsa Gabor: “What I call loaded, I’m not; what other people call loaded, I am.”

Obviously the concept of money, on which Economic Science has been running, is highly artifi-

cial, historically particular and profoundly ideological. I say “ideological” because the promulgation of this fiction, in the same way as the promulgation of the essentialist doctrine of culture, has evident colonizing effects. Clearly the spread of the money concept is useful to the imperialist ambitions of Western capitalism. Yet just as the totalized notion of “culture” constructed by anthropologists, this “money” is a metaphysical phantom, fundamentally and incurably equivocal. Money, like culture, is a pseudo-entity. And a fool is easily separated from both.

## Consciousness of Culture

The word “culture” has become common fare. For the present generation it does much of the work that was formerly assigned to “psychology” or again “ethos.” We used to talk about “the psychology of Washington (D.C.)” or “the ethos of the university;” now it is “the culture of Washington” and “the culture of the university.” It is also “the culture of the cigar factory,” “the culture of drug addiction,” “the culture of adolescence,” “the culture of the Anthropology meetings,” etc. For a long while I was worried about this apparent debasement of the anthropological object. One day I realized that Economics is still going as a discipline despite that everyone talks about “economics,” and “economies,” Sociology likewise survives all the uses of “social.” And recently I saw the following poster in a hotel elevator: “50 hotels, 22 countries, one philosophy.” You think we got troubles with “culture?” What about Philosophy? Everybody’s got a philosophy. It didn’t kill Philosophy.

## Orientalism (dedicated to Professor Gellner)

In Anthropology there are some things that are better left un-Said.

## How to Solve the World's Problems

There is a sure, one word solution to all the world's current problems: Atheism.

## The Origin of Religion

Kant argues that concepts such as cause, substance, all or one, as well as time and space, are *a priori* conditions of possible experience. Making up the difference between percepts and empirical judgments, they turn the former into universal and objective descriptions: not, “when the sun shines on the stone, it grows warm,” which is merely a subjective judgment of perception; but rather, “the sun warms the stone,” which adds the concept of cause, converting perception into the objective mode of experience. But as proposed to experience, the concepts or categories of understanding are not necessarily limited to sensible intuitions. On the contrary, says Kant, we cannot help projecting the conceptual forms by which we have experience beyond the bounds of anything empirical, and thus know a world of being that, without being sensible, has the same experiential qualities. So “the understanding adds for itself to the house of experience a much more extensive wing, which it fills with nothing but beings of thought, without even observing that it has transgressed with its otherwise legitimate concepts the bounds of use.” In other words, nothing is known that has not the properties of experience, even when its being cannot be perceived. Is this not the origin of religion? What we call the “spiritual” is but a normal sensibility of the “real.”

## The Chinese Restaurant Syndrome

Why are well-meaning Westerners so concerned that the opening of a Colonel Sanders in Beijing means the end of Chinese culture? A fatal Americanization. Yet we have had Chinese restaurants in America for over a century, and it hasn't made us Chinese. On the contrary, we obliged the Chinese to invent chop suey. What could be more American than that? French fries?

## Anthropology as Cultural Critique

If Anthropology is really cultural critique, we might as well bring back Hobbes or Rousseau, who were at least aware that they were inventing an antithetical Other for salutary political purposes.

## Waiting for Foucault

“A man of a thousand masks,” one of his biographers said of Michel Foucault, so how seriously can we take the guise he assumed to say that power arises in struggle, in war, and such a war as is of every man against every man. “Who fights whom?” he asked. “We all fight each other.” Critics and exegetes hardly notice Foucault’s connection to Hobbes except to mention the apparently radical disclaimer that his own notion of power is “the exact opposite of Hobbes’ project in *Leviathan*.” We have to give up our fascination with sovereignty, “cut off the king’s head,” free our attention from the repressive institutions of state. Power comes from below. It is invested in the structures and cleavages of everyday life, omnipresent in quotidian regimes of knowledge and truth. If in the Hobbesian contract subjects constitute the power, the Commonwealth that keeps them all in awe, in the Foucauldian schema power constitutes the subjects. All the same, the structuralism that Foucault abandoned for a sense of the poly-amorphous perverse, this structuralism taught that opposites are things alike in all significant respects but one. So when Foucault speaks of a war of each against all, and in the next breath even hints of a Christian divided self—“And there is always within each of us something that fights something else”—we are tempted to believe

that he and Hobbes had more in common than the fact that, with the exception of Hobbes, both were bald.

## Objectivity as a Secondary Quality

According to the basic Enlightenment epistemology, knowledge is objectively grounded by interest, i.e., pleasure and pain, which thus gives us the truth conditions for the properties of things. Why hasn't anyone mentioned that this proof-of-the-pudding empiricism makes all objective knowledge the knowledge of "secondary qualities" in the Lockean sense? The objectivity of objects is relative to a body whose construction determines what is pleasurable and painful; and beyond that, insofar as this body is socially constructed, it is relative to the cultural order. The same would follow from the obvious principle that it is impossible to exhaust the empirical description of anything, inasmuch as it can be known by its relations to an indefinite number of other things; hence the objectivity of the object is always selective.

This is what makes the referential use of signs tricky, since such uses may well be perceptually true, hence seemingly natural, though never necessary. For the French the distinction of *fleuve* and *rivière* is that between an inland waterway that flows to the sea and a substantial tributary thereof, thus incommensurable with SAE "river" and "stream" which refer

simply to waterways of different scales (Jonathan Culler). Yet the French usage is no less an objective-empirical difference for all that it is not the only possible one. Locke said that men would not have it thought that they speak idly of the world; but this does not prevent them from constituting the world variously, "according to the Manners, Fashions and Customs of the Country." The French are hung up on where the sea is. Paris, an inland city, has right and left banks. Maybe it's because England is there.

## More on Materialism

Hence the contradiction that Anthropology has been living with for some time, viz., that symbolicity encompasses the material determination of the symbolic.

## Some Laws of Civilization

First law of civilization: All airports are under construction.

Second law of civilization: I'm in the wrong line.

Third law of civilization: Snacks sealed in plastic bags cannot be opened, even using your teeth.

Fourth law of civilization: The human gene whose discovery is announced in the *New York Times*—there's one every day, a gene *du jour*—is for some bad trait, like schizophrenia, kleptomania, or pneumonia. We have no good genes.

Fifth law of civilization: Failing corporate executives and politicians always resign to spend more time with their families.



## Anti-Relativism<sup>3</sup>

Cultural relativism is first and last an interpretive anthropological—that is to say, methodological—procedure. It is not the moral argument that any culture or custom is as good as any other, if not better. Relativism is the simple prescription that, in order to be intelligible, other people's practices and ideals must be placed in their own historical context, understood as positional values in the field of their own cultural relationships rather than appreciated by categorical and moral judgments of our making. Relativity is the provisional suspension of one's own judgments in order to situate the practices at issue in the historical and cultural order that made them possible. It is in no other way a matter of advocacy.

## Relations of Society = Symbolicity

It is intriguing how many of the dispositions usually attributed to human nature are intrinsic conditions of symbolic discourse—and have in that regard some claims to universality without the necessity of biology. This seems especially evident in the sociology of the linguistic “shifters”: “I” and “you,” “here” and “there,” “now” and “then,” etc. The person using the pronoun “I” thereby constitutes space, time and objects (reference) from his or her point of view—egotism, or even the will to power. One's interlocutor does the same, an alternative assertion of world-making authority—competition. The same alternation recognized as the reversibility of “I” and “you,”—reciprocity or altruism. The mutuality of personhood implied by this interchange of subject positions—sociability. Symbolic discourse contains within itself the elementary principles of human social interaction.

## Postmodern Terrorism

One of the more poignant aspects of the current postmodernist mood is the way it seems to lobotomize some of our best graduate students, to stifle their creativity for fear of making some interesting structural connection, some relationship between cultural practices, or a comparative generalization. The only safe essentialism left to them is that there is no order to culture.

## Capitalism I

Marx said, “the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.” In large part, however, this prediction would still fall under Durkheim’s dictum that “a science of the future has no subject matter.”

## Capitalism II

In the same vein, in a century increasingly marked by the indigenization of modernity, Max Weber's comparative project on the possibilities for capitalist development afforded by different religious ideologies seems increasingly bizarre. Not that it is bizarre to talk of the cosmological organization of practical action, which is surely one of Weber's greatest ideas. What seems increasingly weird is the way Weberians became fixated on the question of why one society or another failed to evolve this *summum bonum* of human history, capitalism—as Westerners have known and loved it. In 1988, when I was in China, this topic was evoking a lot of Confucian. I heard one visiting American sinologist observe that during the Qing dynasty China had come “oh so close” to a capitalist take-off. Yet it all seems like asking why the Highland peoples of New Guinea failed to develop the spectacular potlatch of the Kwakiutl. This is a question the Kwakiutl social scientist could well ask, since with their elaborate pig exchange ceremonies between clans the New Guineans had come so close. Nearer the point—or perhaps it is exactly the point—is the Christian missionaries' question of how it could be that Fijians in their natural state failed to recognize the true god. One might as well ask why European Christians did not develop the ritual cannibalism of Fijians. After all, they came so close.

## Capitalism III:

### Laissez Faire—Qui les a laiss ?

It should not be forgotten that the theory of the most coercive and totalized institution known to humanity, the theory of the state, is the correlary and remedy of a condition of unrestrained self-interest—as in Hobbes, or for that matter St. Augustine. The theory reminds us that an enormous system of social control is required to maintain the *laissez-faire*, the “free” play of self-interest, of a capitalist nation-state. To think otherwise would be like supposing that the feudal knights once charging around the countryside had fashioned their own armor and mounted their horses all by themselves.

## Conspiring in Western Violence and Domination

We are warned—by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, for example—that by celebrating the historical creativity of the indigenous peoples in the face of globalization, we ignore the tyranny of the world system and conspire thus in Western violence and domination. On the other hand, it is clear that when we speak of the systematic hegemony of imperialism, we ignore the peoples' struggles for cultural autonomy and conspire thus in Western violence and domination.

The dilemma is compounded by the fact that both hegemony and resistance are demanded by the current politics of anthropological interpretation. Ever since Gramsci, posing the notion of hegemony has entailed the equal and opposite discovery of the resistance of the oppressed. So the anthropologist who relates the so-called grand narrative of Western domination is also likely to subvert it by invoking “weapons of the weak,” “hidden transcripts” or some such local discourse of cultural defiance. In any case, this is a no-lose strategy since the two characterizations, domination and resistance, are contradictory and in some combination will cover any and every historical eventuality.

## Economic Development

Developing countries, with American help, never develop.

## Economic Development II

Economic development is properly defined as the material enrichment of the people's way of life. Their culture is the object of development, not the impediment.

## The Disciplines of Colonialism

We hear a lot about the disciplines imposed by colonialism—as of ethnification, sanitation, education, taxation, etc.—as though this history of the colonizers were also and equally the history of the colonized. In recent European history it hasn't happened this way. The socialist states of eastern Europe enforced the study of Marx. As late as 1992, Frank Manuel could write, “It is difficult to assess the meaningfulness of the required study of Marx, where it was enforced.” External state or colonial discipline is a two-edged sword. Something happens to it when people get a hold of it.

## Culture of Resistance; Resistance of Culture

There is much talk nowadays about “cultures of resistance” though clearly what is going on among many victims of Western imperialism is better described as the resistance of culture. Moreover, such resistance has been going on for a long time, before and apart from Western imperialism. Involving the integration of the foreign in categories and relations of the familiar—a shift in the cultural contexts of external forms and forces that also changes their values—cultural subversion is in the nature of intercultural relations. As a mode of historical differentiation inherent in meaningful action, this sort of cultural resistance is more inclusive than any intentional opposition, as it neither requires a self-conscious politics of cultural distinction nor has it been historically confined to the reactions of the colonially oppressed. (Recall the theoretical genealogy that leads from the ordering of Boasian diffusions of “culture traits” by Benedictine “patterns of culture,” through Bateson’s determinations of “schismogenesis” in culture contacts, to the similar dialectics of complementary differentiation in Lévi-Strauss’s *Mythologiques*). But pre-colonial culture change apart, even the subjects of modern dependency relations act in the world as social-

historical beings. To paraphrase Freud on Marx, they do not all of a sudden become conscious of who they are when they get their first paycheck. Rather, the forces of capitalist hegemony, mediated by the habitus of specific forms of life, are then played out in the schemata of alien cultural universals.

## The Indigenization of Modernity

The globalization mavens—both in the academy and in the economy—who are now calling upon us to transcend the observation that local societies indigenize the global order are the same ones who first told us to ignore the possibility.

## Whatever Happened to “Late Capitalism”?

It became neo-liberalism.

## Man, the Hunter—and the Former Journal

All across the northern tier of the planet, hunters and gatherers still exist—many of them by hunting and gathering. In Northern America particularly, they have harnessed industrial technologies—snow-mobiles, CB radios, motorized fishing vessels, modern weapons and camping gear, even airplanes—to their traditional “paleolithic” purposes and relationships. As late as 1966, however, anthropologists at the famous “Man, the Hunter” conference at Chicago thought they were talking about an obsolete way of life. Some years later, Richard Lee, one of the original conveners, remarked at another such conference: “Hunting is real. Hunting exists and hunting and gathering economies exist, and this is to me a new fact in the modern world, because twelve years ago at the ‘Man, the Hunter’ conference we were writing an obituary of hunters.” Indeed the title of the 1966 conference now seems as out-of-date as its contents. Today one could not possibly have a conference called “Man, the Hunter.” It would have to be something like, “The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, the Hunter.”

## Return of the Superorganic

Post-structuralism, post-modernism and other “afterological studies” (Jacqueline Mraz) sometimes come down to a sense of cultural coercion, a narrative of hegemony so totalizing, as to put one in mind of the superorganic theory of culture promoted by Leslie White in the 1940s and 50s. (As a student, I knew it well.) In White’s view, culture was an independent, self-moving order of which human action was merely the expression. The individual, White wrote, is in this respect like a pilotless aircraft controlled from the ground by radio waves. Yet substitute “culture” for “discourse” in the following passage from the up-to-date Foucault and we are right back to the obsolete White: “In short, it is a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role of originator and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse” (“Post-structuralist Studies,” M.H. Abrams wrote recently, “whatever their disagreements, coincide in abstracting literary texts from the human world and relocating them in a nonhuman state—specifically in the play of language—as such, or else in forces that operate within a discourse already-in-being.”) Indeed a good many anthropologists have been content to trade in “culture” for Foucauldian “discourse” in recent years—all the while disdaining the “reified” “essentialized” and “totalized” char-



acter of the old culture concept. It seems a fair bargain. As the “process through which social reality comes into being,” or again a “system” that “determines what can be thought and said,” as one anthropological Foucauldian recently put it, such “discourse” seems at least as terrorist as the old-time culturology. Selectively dictating what can be perceived, imagined and expressed, “discourse” is the new superorganic—made even more compelling as the effect of a “power” that is everywhere, in all quotidian institutions and relations.

One wonders if White and Kroeber could have gotten away with their cockamamie theories longer if they had developed a sense of people being the moral victims of the “superorganic.”

## Dead White Whales: From Leviathanology to Subjectology, and Vice Versa

The opposition between Man and the City, between private and polis interest, is already present in classical writings: in several dialogues of Plato as well as many passages of Thucydides. In Thucydides the opposition is notably grounded in a self-regarding human nature driven by desires of glory and gain. The simple-minded sociological dualism of this counterposition of individual and society, the sense of a transparent and unmediated relationship between them, was likewise destined to have a brilliant historical career. Individuals in particular and society in general confronted each other over an empty social space, as though there were no institutions, values and relationships of diverse character that at once connected and differentiated them. This ancient simplicity continues in the latest, most advanced notions of societal constraint, such as Althusserian interpellation or Foucauldian power. True these speak of mediating structures, but only to assign them the singular function of transmitting the larger order of society into the bodies of individuals.

Along the way to modernity, as it passed through early Christianity, the classical individual-society

dualism had absorbed a heavy moral charge, making the conflict well nigh irreconcilable. Pericles might reasonably argue that individuals could best achieve their own happiness by submitting themselves to the public good. In the Christian version, however, the earthly city was no longer Athens but the residence of inherently sinful man; hence the absolute positive value of society as a providential instrument of repression. For St. Augustine, the social control of unruly bodies—of the child by the father, as of the citizen by the state—was a necessary condition of human survival in this contemptible world of Adamic self-pleasers. Otherwise, men would devour each other like beasts. For a mythico-philosophical translation of the same, see Hobbes. For a modern sociological version, Durkheim. Man is double, Durkheim said, double and divided: composed of a moral cum intellectual self, received from society, struggling to hold in check an egocentric and sensual self that is essentially pre-human. But Durkheim is not really modern. This idea of man as half angel, half beast is archaic.

Modern is the more imperialist philosophy that attempts to encompass one side of the ancient dualism in the other: subsuming the individual in the society or else assuming the society in the individual; such that in the end only one of the pair has any independent existence. Either society is no more than the sum of relations between enterprising indi-

viduals, as Jeremy Bentham and Margaret Thatcher would have it; or individuals are nothing more than personifications of the greater social and cultural order, as in certain progressive theories of the construction of subjectivity by power that amount to the death of the subject. The development of capitalism and its discontents gave the old anthropological dualism still another twist, specifically political and in some ways dialectical. Right and Left pushed each other into complementary and extreme arguments of individual and cultural determinism. On the Right, rational choice theory and other such brands of Radical Individualism: all content to resolve social totalities into the projects of self-fashioning individuals. On the Left, concepts of the cultural superorganic and other species of Leviathanology: draconian notions of autonomous cultural behemoths with the powers of fashioning individual subjects to their own purposes.

Radical Individualism is the everyday self-consciousness of bourgeois society; Leviathanology is its recurrent nightmare. Supposing that the values actually originating in the society are, as the means and ends of utilitarian action, attributes of the subject, Radical Individualism suppresses the social and cultural as such—ontologically, as Louis Dumont says. Conversely, Leviathanology dispenses with the subject as such, since he or she merely personifies the categories of the social-cultural totality, and this

actions carry out its independent laws of motion. The famous liberal ideology of the Invisible Hand already harbored these antithetical anthropologies in its obeisances to the great objective social mechanism that mysteriously transformed the good that people did for themselves into the well being of the nation. *Laissez-faire* thus included its negation. And if Adam Smith & Co. could argue for the freedom of individuals to indulge their natural propensity to truck and barter, on the ground that the social good would automatically follow, the critique of capitalism countered by rendering visible this self-subsisting Great Pumpkin with the power of encompassing and conjugating the behavior of individuals in ways beyond their power and control. Thus Marx, in the Preface to *Capital*:

Here individuals are dealt with only insofar as they are personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class interests. My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he remains, however much he may subjectively rise above them.

In the early 20th century, the “superorganic” Anthropology of Kroeber and White indeed envisioned a great cultural critter, with people as it were trapped in its belly as it proceeded on its own course. “Behold now the behemoth...he is a king

over all the children of pride.” Here was a primary source of that ominous sense of culture as an authoritarian prescription of conduct: especially self-defeating conduct, as in the so-called culture of poverty or the “traditional culture” that keeps “underdeveloped peoples” from becoming happy just like us. But even the advanced leviathanological discourses of Althusser and Foucault retained characteristics of the terrific ancestor, employing a pervasive sense of repression without contradiction in their constructions of subjectivity without agency.

Foucault especially. The most awesome transubstantiation of that old holy ghost, the Invisible Hand, into an all-controlling culture-at-large, would have to be Foucault’s pancratic vision of power. Here is power as irresistible as it is ubiquitous, power emanating from everywhere and invading everyone, saturating the everyday things, relations and institutions of human existence, and transmitted thence into people’s bodies, perceptions, knowledges and dispositions. The theoretical effect of this vision, many critics agree, is not merely “an overestimation of the efficacy of disciplinary power,” but “an impoverished understanding of the individual which cannot account for experiences that fall outside the realm of the ‘docile’ body” (L. McNay). Foucault rightly denies he is a structuralist, since all that is left of structuralism in his problematic is its avoidance of human agency. His position is indeed “post-

structuralist,” inasmuch as it theoretically dissolves the structures—families, schools, hospitals, philanthropies, technologies, etc.—into their instrumental effects of discipline and control. It is the classic acid bath of functionalist wisdom, reducing the actual substance of the institution to its conjectured purposes and consequences. Also classic is the effective resolution of the problem to the simple society-individual dualism. Indeed, it all ends with the return of the repressed individual—Subjectology.

For with this dissolution of cultural orders into subjugation effects, the only thing left standing, the only thing substantively remaining to the analysis, is the subject into whom these totalities have been interpolated—or the subject thus interpellated. The effect is indeed ironic because the original project of Leviathanology, insofar as it was opposed to Radical Individualism, was to reduce the individual subject to nullity. But in the upshot, all the structures having been erased as such in favor of their instrumental effects, the subject is the only thing left with any attributes of agency or efficacy. Hence the return of the very metaphysics of the subject that the analysis had meant to deny. Suddenly the pages of the up-to-date journals are filled with all kinds of subjects, subjectivities and selves, thus with an Anthropology in the form of allegory, telling tales of cultural forms and forces in terms of abstract collective persons. Taking the place of the structures is a

whole new cast of characters, featuring bourgeois subjects, national subjects, postmodern subjects, late capitalist subjects, colonial subjects, postcolonial subjects, postcolonial African subjects, not to forget “the easily recognized wounded subject of the modern liberal state.” Then too there are the Cartesian selves and the Melanesian selves, the neo-liberal selves and the subaltern selves, plus a whole population of subjectivities: globalized, hybridized, creolized, modernized, commoditized and other-wized. It is a brave new world that has such people in it. Just as ancient mythologies could represent cosmic forces in anthropomorphic guises, so in the pages of scholarly journals these abstract personifications of cultural macrocosms now strut and fret their hour upon the stage doing...what, exactly?

Well, if not exactly nothing, not too much it seems. Occasionally there are inflated claims: as those made of a certain “late socialist subject,” who according to an article in *Public Culture* was the “source” and “inner logic” of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Or curious promises, as those of certain practitioners of “progressive social theory,” concerned “with the status and formulation of the subject, the implications of a theory of the subject for a theory of democracy.” But it is difficult to see how such concern for the subject can compensate for the historical formations and dynamics that have thus been anthropomorphized. All we get is postcolonial

subjects who resist (but in what determinate way?); colonial subjects who are disciplined or repressed (again, in what way?); bourgeois subjects who are alienated or wounded (like you and me?) or else who commodify (what?) or consume (what?); national subjects who identify (with what?), or other such tautological people. If a cultural or historical analysis were really wanted, one would have to return to the structural conditions that had been lost in the translation to subjective terms.

Nor will the liturgical invocation of "multiple subject positions" do much good. Either the multiplicity is resolved into pure individualism, since in principle there are as many subject positions as there are individuals; or it replicates Leviathanology in general by generating a school of whales, a collection of essentialized, collective persons instead of the one giant one. Either way, Leviathanology ends up in the tautology with which Radical Individualism began: with an abstract and ideal subject possessing the whole kingdom of social ends in the form of his or her own private ends. In the theoretical event, all the evils that were supposed to belong to culture, essentialization, totalization and their ilk, also got transferred to this poor shnook.

## Subjectology Continued

The secret is that Culture and Personality is back. "Subjectivity" is nothing new. Recall Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, which "patterns" turn out to be collective-subjective dispositions. (Just as essentialized as the more recent subjectivities, they are also as much in need of Lacanian psychoanalysis.) The *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, for that matter, is an unsung classic of Subjectology. And how 'bout good ole "national character"?

The antithesis, it seems, is always preserved in its neighbor. Leviathanology and Subjectology are in endless oscillation. To paraphrase Marx, culturology has never gone beyond the antithesis between itself and individualism, and the latter will accompany it as its legitimate negation up to their blessed end.

## Past History

“Did Thucydides,” asks the classicist Simon Hornblower, “ever envision a time when civilized human beings would not speak what we call ancient Greek?” Because he clearly did not, anthropologists have always been prepared to back Herodotus as “the father of history.” Herodotus recounted all the tales, tall and short, that the “barbarians” told him: an ethnographic bent that appealed to anthropologists, but led the less credulous historians to consider him rather “the father of lies.” Add into the comparison Thucydides’ belief in a self-interested human nature and the rational-realism of IR politics, and you will see why he has been the model of Western historiography ever since. So if Anthropology was for too long the study of “history-less peoples,” history for even longer was studying “cultureless peoples.”

Fortunately, all that past history is also past Anthropology, if not vice versa.

## Borrerrrrring!

Thomas Kuhn and others have wondered whether the social sciences have paradigms and paradigm shifts like the natural sciences. Nothing seems to get concluded because some say that the natural sciences don’t even have them, and others that in the social sciences you couldn’t tell a paradigm from a fad. Still, considering the successive eras of functional explanation of cultural forms—first, by their supposed effects in promoting social solidarity, then, by their economic utility, and lately, as modes of hegemonic power—there does seem to be something like a Kuhnian movement in the social sciences. Though there is at least one important contrast to the natural sciences.

In the social sciences, the pressure to shift from one theoretical regime to another, say from economic benefits to power effects, does not appear to follow from the piling up of anomalies in the waning paradigm, as it does in natural science. In the social sciences, paradigms are not outmoded because they explain less and less, but rather because they explain more and more—until, all too soon, they are explaining just about everything. There is an inflation effect in social science paradigms, which quickly cheapens them. The way that “power” explains everything from Vietnamese second person plural

pronouns to Brazilian workers' architectural bricolage, African Christianity or Japanese sumo wrestling. But then, if the paradigm begins to seem less and less attractive, it is not really for the standard logical or methodological reasons. It is not because in thus explaining everything, power explains nothing, or because differences are being attributed to similarities, or because contents are dissolved in their (presumed) effects. It's because everything turns out to be the same: power. Paradigms change in the social sciences because, their persuasiveness really being more political than empirical, they become commonplace universals. People get tired of them. They get bored.

In fact power is already worn out. Borrrring! As the millennium turns over, the new eternal paradigm *du jour* is identity politics. The handwriting is on the wall: I read where fly-fishing for trout is a way the English bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century developed a national identity. "In nineteenth century England, fishing, not less than war, was politics by other means," writes anthropologist Richard Washabaugh in a book called *Deep Trout*. (Is this title a play on Clifford Geertz, so to speak, or on "Deep Throat"?) Well, the idea gets at least some credibility from the fact that fishing is indeed the most boring sport on television. Coming soon: the identity politics of bowling, X-games, women's pocket billiards, and Nascar racing.

## Double Identity

Those who talk a lot about identity politics often practice it in the way they talk about it. (You know what I mean.)

## Know Thyself

Anthropologists generally live in the most capitalistic and commodified societies in the world. Along with all other human scientists, including cult studs, they tell us that capitalism and commodification are hegemonic forces cum discourses that enslave people to particular ontologies or regimes of truth: notably those that resolve persons and the objects of their existence to exchange values. But do anthropologists, living under the worst of such regimes, really experience themselves as culturally unfree? And how could they even conceive, let alone experience, cultural differences, the otherness of others? Hegemony is supposed to determine not only what one thinks but also what one cannot think. This makes Anthropology a performatic contradiction of the latest cultural theory.

There is a certain species of academic whiffle bird that is known to fly in ever-decreasing hermeneutic circles until...

## The Political Economy of the Humanities

Anthropologists have become the working-class of the Cultural Studies movement. Relegated to the status of ethnographic proles in the academic division of labor, they are the ones condemned to long days, months and years of dirty and uncomfortable (field) work. Their minds numbed by laboring on obdurate cultural realities, they leave higher theory to English professors. These cult studs are the thinking class, an emancipated (and emancipating) literati, while anthropologists are content to be the subaltern clients of their hegemonic discourses.

Anthropologists of the world unite...



## An Empire of a Certain Kind

Rallying the Athenians after a second year of war with the Spartans, the second year of the Peloponnesian War, Pericles warned his countrymen that they were not only in peril of losing their empire but of suffering “from the animosities incurred in its exercise.” “For what you hold,” he told them, “is, to speak somewhat plainly, a tyranny. Perhaps it was wrong to take it, but it would be dangerous to let it go.” Tyranny abroad was the work of the first and (some would say) the greatest democracy known to history. But then, the same sort of contradiction between freedom and subjugation inhabited Athens’ domestic politics, where immigrants, slaves and their descendants, as well as women, were denied many of the democratic privileges enjoyed by the minority of the population, the full male citizens.

The Athenians developed an empire of a distinctive kind—and distinctively disposed to brew up a volatile mixture of attraction and humiliation among the people dominated by it. It was not like the European colonial empires of modern times that physically imposed their own state on other territories and societies. Gained by invasion and maintained by occupation, such imperial states were actually sovereign over the subject peoples, governing

them with all the necessary means of administration, regulation and compulsion. But the Athenian empire was domination without administration. In many ways it was an empire of signs—signs of power: magnificent, draconian or both at once, that brought other states more or less voluntarily into submission, perhaps for their own advantage and protection but surely on pain of their destruction. Athens did not directly rule the others, but everywhere she could she intervened in local politics, often by force or by show of force, to create proxy democracies that would be like and compliant with her own.

Imperialism as a democratic mission. Many of the tributary cities were nominally “allies,” culturally bound to Athens by common heritage (as Ionian Greeks) and politically bound in a League of which she was the hegemon. Securing the sea routes and the resources of trade, the empire was the political condition of the great commercial enterprise that made Athens the richest and most populous city-state of the Hellenic world. In turn the wealth the Athenians drew from the empire went into the displays of high culture and brute force by which they kept it under control.

The marvelous and the murderous: an empire of domination without administration works largely by demonstration—effects of its power. On the one hand, Athens was a spectacle of culture that functioned—to adopt a Hobbesian phrase of gover-

nance—“to keep them all in awe.” Such was the politics of this glory that was Greece: the magnificence of her architecture and art, the brilliance of her theater, the glittering processions and ceremonies, the Academy and the Agora, the gymnasia and the symposia. “Our city,” boasted Isocrates, “is a festival for those who come to visit her.” Subject cities notably visited her with their annual tributes at the time of the principal religious festival, the City Dionysia, which was also the theater season. Even those who never saw Athens could know her superiority by the reputation of her writers and philosophers, her politicians and her athletes. Almost inevitably, then, her greatest enemy, oligarchic Sparta, opposed her by a strategy of cultural negation: adopting a material fundamentalism and a puritanical moralism that denied the values Athens knew as civilization. A mere collection of old-fashioned villages, Sparta, commented Thucydides, could show no measure of her fame in the poverty of the remains she would leave for posterity; whereas, the ruins of Athens in time to come would make her power seem twice as great as it actually was. On the other hand, those who were not awed by Athens’ glory, who did not acknowledge her superiority or revolted against it, would feel her sting—again by way of demonstration.

In the empire of signs, force too is a sign of force, perhaps the most effective if not always the most

economical, aiming to induce the fear and obedience of the many out of the brutal example made of the few. So argued the bellicose Cleon, urging the Athenians to respond to the revolt of the allied city of Mytilene by exterminating the lot of them. “Punish them as they deserve,” he said, “and teach your allies by a striking example that the penalty of rebellion is death.” In this case, a counter argument (to the same exemplary effect) that it would be unwise to kill the innocent common people, who were everywhere Athens’ natural democratic allies, limited the Athenians to the slaughter of the 1000 or so Mytilenean aristocrats they held responsible. But in the famous case of Melos, a Spartan colony that would not submit to the Athenians, offering instead to remain neutral and friendly to them, the outcome was much less fortunate. Your friendship, the Athenians told them, would only be “an argument to our subjects of our weakness.” This was the sixteenth year of the Peloponnesian war, well after the Mytilene affair, when demonstrations of Athenian might and resolve were taking on more and more strategic value. So now, delivering an ultimatum to the Melians, they in effect said, you’re either with us or you’re against us. If states maintain their independence, it means they are strong, and if “we do not molest them it is because we are afraid; so that beside extending our empire, we should gain in security by your subjection.” Counting on the justice of their cause and the feckless hope that the

Spartans or the gods would save them, the Melians refused to surrender, and were wiped out. All the men were killed, all the women and children sold into slavery. Not that they hadn't been warned of Athens' will to power. "Of the gods we believe," the Athenians told them, "and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can."

Thus driven by a desire of power after power, the Athenians in the end overreached themselves, and they lost everything. They had gotten to the point where it seemed they would collapse if they could not expand. "We cannot fix the exact limit at which our empire shall stop; we have reached a position in which we must not be content with retaining what we have but must scheme to extend it, for if we cease to rule others, we shall be in danger of being ruled ourselves." So spoke Alcibiades in winning the approval of the Athenian assembly for the grandiose Sicilian campaign that ended in complete disaster, and set the course of empire toward decline and defeat. But already at the beginning, nearly fifty years before the Peloponnesian war, when the Athenians, in beating off the Persian menace, discovered their own destiny as a sea power, they set in motion a geopolitics of expansion that was almost a formula for spinning out of control. Increasing rule of the seas meant developing the commercial power that would deliver the necessary money,

materiel and manpower; as conversely, increasing commerce meant developing the maritime-military strength necessary to secure it. Democratic Athens became a predatory power. Yet its burgeoning population and business soon made it dependant on critical energy imports from barbarian (i.e., non-Greek) lands situated at the limits of its military force: the rich food grains of distant Sicily, Egypt, and the Crimea. Placed at the center of a sphere of domination that was thus moving outward in many directions, Athenian interests, costs and dangers were all subject to geographic multiplication on the order of the square of the radius of an expanding circumference times 3.14159. To meet its difficulties, Athens could put pressure on fellow Greeks, as by turning allies into tributaries, or she could find new barbarians to conquer. In either case, the empire that brought well being in the homeland spread humiliation and resentment abroad. Caught in a vicious cycle of expansion and repression, Athens could be generally detested in the same degree she became glorious and admired.

The Peloponnesian war was a testimony to this cycle of domination and resistance—and over time, exaggerated it. As opposed to the incidents that set it off, the war's "truest cause," as Thucydides said in a famous passage, "was the growing power of the Athenians and the fear this inspired in the Spartans." If the war then required the Athenians to further

exploit their “growing power,” it also offered their subjects new possibilities of revolt and (Spartan) liberation. Cleon’s warning to the Athenians in the fifth year of the conflict was even stronger than Pericles’—“your empire is a despotism and your subjects disaffected conspirators”—and events did not prove him wrong. At the end of the war, as the Spartans under Lysander closed in on their besieged and starving city, the Athenians, as Xenophon said, mourned for their loss and still more for their fate, as they feared they would be dealt with as they had dealt with so many other peoples. All Greece rejoiced to see this city fall and those they had driven out of their own cities now restored to them. Thucydides tells us that he did not set out to write a history merely in order to please the immediate public. He dared to hope his recounting of the Peloponnesian war would “last forever”—inasmuch as human histories of this kind were sure to happen again. So he would be content, he said, “if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which, in the course of human things, will at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future.”

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