

Ethnography's troubles and the reproduction of academic habitus

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What are the stakes in the scholarly debates over narrative strategies for representing reality? Is it a meaningful concern with respect to politics and theory? What sets of power relations are unsettled by the debates among ethnographers over the politics of representation?

As a cultural anthropologist I will focus my response to Tierney on anthropology's peculiar relationship to ethnography. The unique role of participant-observation ethnography in shaping the discipline of anthropology forces anthropologists into a nitty-gritty politics of witnessing human interaction and practice that they cannot escape physically and morally. Historically, they have focused on the poor and powerless, hence by definition they have to confront face to face in their fieldwork blood, sweat and tears. The power relations that create the worlds of the people they study and cause them to suffer disproportionately, however, are usually glaringly absent from their ethnographies.

Until the last few decades of the twentieth century, much of mainstream anthropology was unreflexively a spoil of colonialism and arguably even a relic of genocide. At the local micro-level most anthropologists advocated on behalf of the victims of the global power relations that were wreaking havoc on the people they were studying. This usually did not amount to much more than arguing at the margins for kinder, gentler versions of colonialism and ethnocide since they generally shut out the larger world from their analysis – focusing instead on exotic others in a global vacuum. In the 1970s a Marxist-driven anticolonial critique raised concerns over the way anthropology – especially British functionalist anthropology specializing in African and Asian tribal societies – systematically erased colonial power relations from its ethnographic corpus (Asad, 1973). Similarly, the folklore and the culture and personality schools of U.S. salvage anthropology which devoted itself to documenting Native American societies from the late nineteenth century through the early 1960s erased the fact of genocide – or only mentioned it in passing (Scheper-Hughes, 2001). In recent years there have been repeated, urgent calls for anthropology to break its silence on the subject of social suffering, inequality, and poverty in the new World Order (Farmer, 1995; Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Sider, 1989).

Despite often coming from prominent scholars at prestigious institutions, calls for an ethnography that engages theory with politics in ways that are relevant to the people being studied has remained marginal to the overall discipline of anthropology. Instead of placing colonialism, genocide, and social suffering at the center of its largely internal debates over the politics of representation over the past two decades, anthropology has been most creative and prolific in its critique of the textual inadequacies of

its method. This textual and philosophical turn, often loosely called postmodernism, has been more influenced by the school of symbolic anthropology that was hegemonic in the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s than by the political economy approaches that were popular during that same period among intellectuals in the non-industrialized world and in Europe.

Despite its apolitical roots, the interpretively centered deconstructionism of U.S. postmodernist critique has been beneficial for ethnography. It has debunked the naively positivist enlightenment project of mainstream social science and humanities and has unsettled the essentializing tendencies of anthropology's culture concept which so easily slide into yet another version of racism and postcolonial domination. The recognized illegitimacy of the omniscient ethnographer now forces even openly positivist ethnographers to locate themselves in their texts, and to recognize that reality is socially constructed – if not fragmented, dialogical, and contested. On the surface at least, anthropology is humbler and less dogmatically totalizing. Anthropological writing has also become somewhat more experimental and creative – even if, as Tierney notes, most ethnographic writing remains boring and traditional.

At the same time, as Tierney warns, the radical constructionist emphasis of post-modernism in ethnographic writing has come at high political cost. I take his concern further to suggest that the hermeneutic and interpretive gestalt of contemporary U.S. anthropology may be reproducing the erasures of previous generations of ethnographers who elided the high-stakes power relations of colonialism and conquest that so devastated ethnographic subjects in flesh and blood on the ground. The pioneers of ethnography were obsessed with drawing complicated kinship charts and describing pretty rituals and coherent belief systems. With that precedent behind us, what might our debates over narrative strategy and the politics of representation be missing today under the larger power structure of globalized neo-liberalism?

I do not think Tierney would disagree with much of what I have just written. I am concerned, however, because he calls for an even greater focus on writing strategies and author's voice. He says he wants there to be a "space for individuals who remain wedded to the idea of building worlds that are more equitable and just" – and I believe him. But at the same time he frames the importance of getting real as "playfully ironic" as if to apologize for asserting the importance of justice and equity – no matter how contentiously defined. He implies that writing against inequality might be a naïve, old-fashioned, anti-intellectual concern. As a result, Tierney's call for a politically informed theory and practice that engages with the needs and concerns of the people about whom ethnographies are written does not appear convincing because it is too concerned with text-for-text's-sake. His call for politics consequently rings too much of faith. His support of real politics is disconnected from what appears to be the "really real," productive, fun, and serious work of ethnography, which becomes defined as textual analysis. Writing about what really matters to the people ethnographers work with by implication becomes a secondary instrumental byproduct that is not necessarily relevant to high theory or intellectual creativity.

As academics we must beware of Kissinger's aphorism that we love to fight so hard over so little, but there does seem to me to be something trivial about how excited and articulate ethnographers wax when they deconstruct texts. Tierney's article, consequently, fails to practice what he preaches. It contradicts his stated political purpose by reproducing what I would call – at the risk of totalizing – a safe academic habitus that eschews, despite its political language, the higher-stakes power relations that have

real meaning to the socially vulnerable. By focusing our discussion of ethnography onto fascinating, hypertextual topics we do not threaten significant power structures. Our debates over the politics of representation are of little real consequence to the blood, sweat and tears of everyday life that ethnographers by definition encounter on the ground and even in discourse, but usually fail to write against.

With suspicious predictability, contemporary ethnographers have become more excited when they write about the meaning-of-meaning-of-what-was-meant, than when they write about confronting power relations in flesh and blood. Since I share Tierney's academic habitus I recognize that it is exciting to pore over language and engage scholastic arguments with obsessive precision. Indeed, I sometimes find that preparing obscure articles for specialized journals with limited circulation clarifies, destabilizes or opens up my thinking. It also feels (*à la habitus*) good at times to write something creative and more accessible to a wider reading public. But none of this addresses larger issues of more urgent concern to the people ethnographers study. I am convinced that we should deeply distrust the safe academic habitus that makes us productive scholars concerned with textual analysis. Our privileged noncontroversial intellectual orientation is not so easily redeemed, as Tierney might have us believe, simply by writing more creatively.

At the risk of appearing like a righteous, old-fashioned Marxist I want to conclude by belaboring anthropology's need for a preferential option for the socially vulnerable. The discipline of anthropology over the past three-quarters of a century has been deeply constituted by the participant-observation methodology that requires long-term interpersonal contact across major social power parameters – class, ethnicity, and gender most frequently. As a result anthropology can offer a unique space for upper-class, alienated, suburbanized intellectuals to resist their privileged intellectual habitus and force themselves to violate the apartheid of their society and write about injustice in comprehensible language. It is embarrassing that anthropologists have waxed so polemically over writing style and representational meaning while corporate capital runs amok across the globe with such transparent rapaciousness. Our intellectual anxieties might be better focused on developing critiques of the fields of social power that we study, whether they contain hunter-gatherers, laboratory scientists, prison guards or – in the spirit of global interconnectedness – all of the above. I fear that postmodern-inspired debates over textuality do not have high stakes for anyone involved – except academics – even if the debates are creative, fun, and in some way subversive to established positivist dogma. The postmodernist critique of modernity's enlightenment project and of ethnography's essentializing pseudo-omniscience is certainly well taken. Following Tierney, to be playful and ironic, the postmodernists got it right with respect to the politics of representation. It is time, however – and has been for too long – to move on from the debates that postmodernism opened up in ethnography and instead to make sure that something powerful is at stake. One way of contributing to this is to conduct ethnographies of actually existing social suffering.

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