TOWARDS AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF TRANSLOCAL PROCESSES AND CENTRAL INSTITUTIONS OF MODERN SOCIETIES

by RICHARD ROTTENBURG

I will try to show that some important problems of an anthropological occupation with modern Euro-American societies become visible, and perhaps even some possible solutions become perceivable and debatable if one starts from an abstract distinction between symmetry and asymmetry.

Mainstream anthropology, so it can be argued, is asymmetric in the simple sense of dealing primarily with certain people, namely those outside Europe and white North-America. Exceptions to this rule either prove the rule, or else are rather new developments of the kind I am proposing here.¹ In primarily dealing with people outside the Trans-Atlantic domain anthropology focuses on the key institutions of these often small societies, or societies made to look small. However, in relation to the Trans-Atlantic domain, these societies are peripheral, and it is this occupation with the periphery that has become the core of anthropological competence.

European Anthropology (in Germany Volkskunde) too primarily deals with certain people and aspects of societies only. Even if there are many exceptions to this rule, it can be stated that mainstream European Anthropology (as practised under various names in most European countries) has a remarkable tendency towards the periphery of the own society and towards marginality in the selection of topics. Allow me to illustrate this with one example only.

¹ There are several substantial differences between the USA and Europe, and between the various European anthropological traditions. For my argument, however, I can leave these differences out without invalidating my argument.
Sometime in October 1996 I received a phone call from a German radio station. The journalist on the phone wanted to know what research projects our department is running concerning the German-Polish border. Her assumption was that the Department of Anthropology is in charge of smuggling and prostitution, of black labour and all kinds of informal, illegal and sublegal forms of creatively dealing with the border milieu. I do not believe that the assumptions of the journalist were her own idiosyncratic problem. I rather think her expectations were basically accurate since this is what most of anthropology is about. And indeed, I too believe that this preoccupation with the margins and with subversive discourses is a precious competence which gives anthropology its critical impetus and perhaps its relevance. From the beginning, one of the central goals of anthropological work was to give voice to those who have no voice in society. To see Europe, modernity, and industrialization from the point of view of those who are losing or even made to disappear by westernization certainly was and still is a necessary and noble undertaking. Critical inquiries about the meaning and the consequences of the modern meta-narratives of endless, linear progress and emancipation require an understanding of non-modern, polyphonous world views.

To make these mute, alternative and subversive voices heard and public, to rehabilitate their rationality and their ethos always was and perhaps will always be the main source of anthropological impact. However, there is something to be added here. New questions have to be asked.

The anthropological rehabilitation of everything outside the mainstream of modernity usually goes hand in hand with the above-mentioned asymmetry. One may object here and say: the anthropological work on what formerly was called the "Third World" has turned its attention away from the sole occupation with traditional parts and aspects of these societies and nowadays also deals with topics like labour migration, urbanization, religious, ethnic and social movements. But still, I would maintain: even this anthropology uses translocal macro-phenomena as frameworks without turning them into immediate objects of its investigations.

Or, to come back to my example with the German-Polish border: conventional anthropological analysis takes the political, legal and economic framework for the above-mentioned local, informal and subversive activities as something given. Visa and customs regulations, border police structures and competences, official transnational collaborations, technologies of remote control, and all the rest of it, enter anthropological analyses as hard factors resulting out of processes which are beyond anthropological concern. They enter anthropological work as macro-phenomena which infringe the everyday life worlds of marginalised groups.

In other words, when anthropology moves outside its inherited terrain, it gives up one of its otherwise highly esteemed main principles: to pursue a holistic approach. Instead, anthropology creates asymmetry simply by leaving out certain phenomena. When looked at carefully, these phenomena all seem to fall within one broad category: practices which are related to formally organized, allegedly rational processes immersed with power.
The point I wish to make here is that this inherited, cherished and comfortable asymmetry has two consequences which I think have become too costly to be acceptable any longer.

Firstly, anthropological attention for only those phenomena that are outside formal, allegedly rational processes makes those formal processes appear to be of a totally different nature from the processes anthropology conventionally studies. Thus on the one side we have cultural phenomena beyond rationality, to be studied by anthropology, and on the other side we have phenomena which are rational and culture-free, and thus cannot be studied by anthropology.

If economic and political processes, decisions and institutions relating to the German-Polish border to stay within my example are outside anthropological attention, they are by implication outside the realm which can be ethnographically analysed. This again by implication means, that what is culture in the one realm, is rationality in the other. When German and Polish authorities meet to discuss ways of controlling car theft in Germany, this is rational bureaucracy and perhaps power relations. When people of various nationalities meet to organize this car theft and the export of the cars to somewhere in Eastern Europe, this is Mafia and thus culture.

By building up this asymmetry and drawing this implicit difference between two realms, the production of anthropological knowledge effectively contributes to the production of a certain legitimating discourse and protects the excluded realm from critique. Rehabilitating marginality and the beyond of rationality seems to contribute to the construction of a powerful, rational, monolithic centre. One of the great chances to comply with the original and noble anthropological intention to provide modernity with a mirror that shows all its hidden predicaments would thus not only be missed but turned into the opposite. My question is: how to get back to this programme?

I now come to the second negative consequence of anthropological asymmetry. In anthropological analysis translocal macro-phenomena (or in another vocabulary: macro-actors) are introduced as fixed frameworks for certain local phenomena to be studied in ethnographic detail. Usually, certain puzzling local phenomena discovered by ethnographic analysis are explained by reference to macro-phenomena, like for instance globalization or the introduction of what has become known as market economy, or civil society. These macro-phenomena, on the other hand, are simply taken for granted, they appear to be falling from heaven: we hear about the "arrival of the market", or "the arrival of democracy", etc. Sometimes this heaven appears to be the sister disciplines of economics and political sciences. The point, however, is that these phenomena do not seem to have a local social space where they are produced, transformed, manipulated and translated. Equipped with some mysterious inert power they come and hit hard on the everyday life worlds of local micro-actors which anthropologists study. But where and how are these macro-actors made up, made translocal, hard, durable and powerful? We don't learn much about this in anthropology.

One may here legitimately reply: Why do you not simply let the economists and political scientists go on to study these questions on their own? Well, actually I don't
object to this. However, these disciplines have turned to anthropology for support to establish new and more adequate approaches. I am here suggesting, that instead of only passively giving this support to them we might need to turn the issue into our own project if we want to keep anthropology what it always wanted to be: a holistic approach that provides modernity with a critical mirror.

If the shortcomings of an anthropology of modern societies are related to the specific asymmetry I tried to explain above, than the solutions obviously seem to be with some sort of symmetry, i.e. the inclusion of the central institutions and translocal processes into the ethnographic research agenda. However, it won't be possible to simply include things left out and leave everything else unchanged. The symmetry in topics can only work if it is extended to an epistemological symmetry, to the creation of symmetric anthropology.

Now, what can this symmetric anthropology be about? Borrowing from what perhaps can best be called anthropology (comparative sociology) of translation I would propose four principles to achieve symmetry.¹

1. To use the same language for truths and errors.

This form of axiomatic agnosticism aims at impartiality among all actors and arguments engaged in a controversy. It departs from the usual practice which considers only deviations from some preconceived truth in need of cultural explanations. To bring a few examples: If the management of a development project decides on a certain policy, this at least from some perspectives may either work and materialize in certain anticipated activities of the parties concerned, or it may fail and result in unintended consequences. Conventionally, the time of anthropological analysis comes with the failures. When it works, the case does not seem to require anthropological attention. This simple pattern carries a lot of weight, though. By not studying successful cases one makes a strong statement about the assumed cause for success: the impression is created that the cause is the correct management decision, and that this causal link is so obvious and beyond question that it does not need any cultural analysis. Not studying successful cases unintentionally makes in addition to unproved causal statements the management looks rational, wise and full of power. To avoid these indirect statements, the first principle of symmetry requires an ethnographic study of both cases and a presentation in the same language.

A second example: Since 1989 the post-communist countries are invaded by messengers of a master narrative on the free market as a specific form of societal integration being opposed and superior to plan and regulation. To focus ethnographic enquiry on those cases where the master narrative seems to fail, implicitly means that the other cases, where the master narrative seems to materialize successfully, have their automatic explanation in the truth of the market narrative. Again, a causality is constructed by a fallacy and not by the usual procedures of ethnographic plausibility.

¹ The whole argument I am presenting in this paper is primarily based on the work by Bruno Latour. We have never been modern 1991/1993. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf. Latour himself, of course, draws from a whole body of literature which I do not mention here for matters of simplicity.
A third and final example: A team of natural scientists discover in their laboratory a certain pattern of the material world. This discovery may either be accepted by their fellow scientists and spread over the world as a new truth, or it may be rejected and thus left in the drawers of the poor scientists for the time being. Conventionally, both cases would be outside ethnographic enquiry due to the assumption that the knowledge generated by natural sciences can objectively be proved true or false. Following the principle of symmetry requires the ethnographers of scientific knowledge to analyse both cases in the same language and with complete agnosticism.

For all three examples given above the conclusion is the same: Asymmetric focussing on deviations and errors unintentionally enforces certain truths and societal powers by excluding them from cultural analysis. What in fact requires explanation, in the end appears to be explaining the issue at hand. Back to my examples: Instead of learning something about the reasons for a project's success, an emic version of the story about management decisions is taken literally and thus given additional legitimacy and credibility. Instead of learning how the master narrative about the market is translated into local arenas, an apparent inherent truth of the market narrative seems to explain those cases where it works in a pragmatic sense for some actors. And finally, instead of learning something about how a specific version of the natural world becomes accepted as true, the alleged truth of this version seems to explain its selection.

The proposal to use the same language for truths and errors is thus an attempt to radically get rid of the perhaps most crucial anthropological obstacle. Speaking about culture necessarily means to speak about difference, and speaking about difference easily results in what the Americans call othering. While the classical anthropological solution always amounted to improve the quality of empirical work to rehabilitate other people with their alterity, the symmetric approach additionally calls for a more radical solution. Attempts to rehabilitate alterity must be complemented not replaced by attempts to deconstruct our own truths by direct ethnographic analysis.

The above given example with the natural scientists who failed with their discovery takes us to the second principle of symmetry.

2. To use the same language for humans and non-humans.

The assumption that successes and failures of scientific statements about the natural world both need socio-cultural, political and economic explanations, easily results in a radical constructivism pretending that humans and particularly also modern natural scientists are principally not in a position to make any true statements about the regularities within the natural world. Under this radical perspective the modernist assumption that society is soft and debatable, everything can be negotiated and can always be done otherwise, while nature is solid and indisputable, is simply turned around. While this complete turn puts magic and science on an equal foot, it treats anthropology and the natural sciences asymmetrically. The whole truth, so it now seems, has moved to the side of the anthropologists who can tell the natural
scientists what they in fact are doing without really being aware of it. This simple inversion of the story is as implausible as its original version.

Instead of either assuming that humans are able to discover objective laws within nature and are thus able to predict, govern and exploit nature, or vice versa, that humans are principally unable to get in contact with anything outside their language and categories, one can alternatively assume — with Bruno Latour, as a third option — that humans negotiate with the natural world certain regularities. Both parties can and do change their positions from time to time and thus make the negotiations nearly as risky and indeterminate as political negotiations among humans. While perhaps philosophers of sciences need to think about the truth of this supposition anthropologists in fact can use it as a heuristic and pragmatist tool for effective analysis.

This assumption would also cater for another, not less important problem. A large part of the main theories of society (perhaps with exception of Marxism) leave out the non-human elements of society. Although most obviously modern, industrial society is mainly characterized by its effective inclusion of non-human elements in the form of technologies, the relevant theories treat these non-humans as something extraterritorial. Either, nature and processed nature in the form technology appear as something useful, under full and objective control, as passive instruments of human society providing progress, or else, technology appears as a dangerous threat to civil society. Nuclear power plants with their necessary safety measures, systems of remote control by computerization, biotechnology, and many other non-humans are sometimes felt to undermine democracy and even the human condition as such. Nevertheless, in practice the inclusion of processed nature into modern society goes on and even incredibly accelerates, and no one really believes that inventions in this field can be nullified and forgotten. Anthropology with its modernist division between nature and culture appears helpless in the face of these processes.

Assuming that humans are negotiating and associating with non-humans, and thus accepting non-humans as social agents seems to open a perspective for an anthropological analysis of these most important aspects of Euro-American societies. In consequence an anthropology of modern society would have to use the same language for humans, non-humans and hybrid combinations between the two of them.

The first and second principles of symmetry result in a third one which is of obvious importance for anthropology, and in fact was the starting point of the whole debate.

3. To use the same language for western and non-western societies.

My argument above was that the anthropological rehabilitation project of those people who are not active and avowing carriers of modernization has become unconvincing. The reason for this, I said, was the asymmetry in the selection of anthropological topics and representations. The hidden asymmetry needs further specification. In anthropological discourse non-western societies are presented as deserving reha-
bilitation in all aspects besides one: their approach to nature and thus technology seems erroneous, they lack the western, objective way to analyse and thus predict, control and exploit nature.

Allow me to make this difficult point with a simple observation. With all respect for the anthropological rehabilitation work of magic, witchcraft and animism, I have never come across an anthropologist who would treat her malaria in the field with other than modern drugs, or else, if the situation gets serious, would take the next aeroplane to Europe or America. And the sometimes suspiciously heroic stories about having gone through agonizing tropical diseases with only local medical support tell us much about the implied total distrust in local healing methods. The anthropological high esteem for the ecological wisdom of animism or the psychological wisdom of shamanism cannot be read without noting this other aspect.

Combining principles one (no distinction between truths and errors) and two (no distinction between humans and non-humans) to constitute principle three (same language for western and non-western societies) offers a way out of the unproductive dichotomy between western and non-western cultures. At the same time it opens a new way to conceptualize differences without relying on an absolute epistemological divide between logical and prelogical systems of thought.

4. To use the same language for anthropological and non-anthropological practices.

This principle refers back to principle one: applying one language for truths and errors first of all requires that the production of anthropological knowledge must be described in the same language as any other practice. This is to suggest that anthropological knowledge is no more above those constraints limiting other forms knowledge production. It thus carries the same inevitable traces of its production process and can be politically utilized like those forms of knowledge which it wants to analyse.

In addition, there is a practical necessity for principal four: In complying with the symmetric approach and thus studying, for example, processes of formal organizing, ethnographers deal with people of the same level of education and the same, sometimes higher social status who advance the same claims about knowledge validity as themselves.

If anthropology wants to stick to its original programme to provide modernity with a critical mirror, it needs to include on its agenda the ethnography of the central institutions and processes of European societies. To do this, the mentioned principles of symmetry might be useful or even necessary. This complementary expansion of the anthropological agenda I am not speaking of replacement would at the same time open up ways to overcome the problems of the conventional exclusive focus on local phenomena and life worlds which are thus made to appear threatened by mysterious translocal macro-phenomena beyond anthropological explanation. Translocal processes can be opened up for ethnographic exploration by shifting the attention to the local production of translocality and to the spaces between cultures.
This spaces are full of mediators loaded with ideas, models, new languages, artefacts to be moved and translated between localities. A good deal of these mediators are part of formal organizations, like international companies, globally acting consultancies, international institutions, the global institution of western sciences, missions, Mafias, and so on. And formal organizations, perhaps more precise: organizational fields are themselves hybrids, composed of humans, artefacts and technologies of remote control. These technologies include communication technologies, globally standardized procedures for commercial accounting, for calculating the statics of buildings and bridges, for producing valid scientific arguments, and so on.

The very debate in which I am involved here is facilitated by the existence of globally standardized procedures for the production of anthropological arguments. At the same time the workshop at which this paper was presented at Poznań in November 1996 was one of these countless local events that contribute to the continuity and perhaps slight change of the translocal phenomenon which would be nothing without these local materializations.
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