

'THE SELF' AND 'THE OTHER' IN DISCIPLINARY ANTHROPOLOGY

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ABSTRACT:

In this paper I argue that fieldwork constitutes a 'limit-experience' where self and other encounter and confront one another. I suggest this confrontation provides an opening for what Foucault described as knowing "how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known" (1992). It begins by outlining Foucault's notion of 'pastoral power', and argues that anthropology is an explicitly pastoral discipline, whose pastoral function emerges by interrogating the opposition of 'Self' to 'Other'. Drawing on early and contemporary anthropological writings, I show how the discipline constructs a knowing Self which is opposed to an Other that is actively denied selfhood whilst being simultaneously constructed as a site of instruction. I conclude by exploring how anthropology might forge a radical break with pastoral power by recasting our understanding of fieldwork and recognising that it is primarily a site for a de-centering encounter between self and other selves.

The term "pastoral power" was coined by Foucault (1999). It describes the specific character and modes of articulation where 'the individual' is laid bare; for example, between confessor and confessed, teacher and pupil, doctor and patient. The interiority of 'the individual' is exposed and in the process the person becomes a subject that has sins to be cleansed, a mind to be trained, and a body that is constantly monitored for signs of sickness. Pastoral power is, therefore, an operating power. It discloses presuppositions that imply how 'knowledge', 'morality', 'progress' and 'reason' – indeed the very 'well-being' and edification of the subject – depend upon a series of hierarchical social relations which strive for the eradication of error and 'other' forms of false or non-knowledge.

Pastoral power has specifically Christian origins. However, the emergence of nation-states and capitalism in the nineteenth century saw pastoral power elaborated and modified towards more 'secular' objectives. From the nineteenth century onwards, the pastoral function was no longer one of "salvation" but "health, well-being (that is, sufficient wealth, standard of living), security, [and] protection against accidents" (Foucault 1996). If the image of shepherd and flock defined pastoral interaction as a relationship between an agent of salvation and Others encumbered by a particular lack (i.e., sin) then government-as-administration – *indeed as medicine* – disclosed the continuous development of pastoral power, its new modalities and new-found domains of operation in the 'fields' of education, health and law.

Historically, pastoral power was an 'uplifting' and 'correcting' power that assumed the necessity of a civilising agent to preserve and extend reason. Critically, as colonial expansion advanced, 'unreason' soon became equated with 'the Other' that was found beyond the shores of Europe, and the Other became defined as an entity that resisted reason and the ordering practices that reason enshrined¹. Defining the Other in terms of 'darkness', 'savagery' and 'partiality' allowed 'the West' to identify itself as the bearer of 'light', 'culture' and 'substantiality'. This, among other things, allowed colonialism to be conveniently legitimated as the transmission of 'civilisation' to less fortunate peoples.

¹ In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski claimed that "ethnology had introduced law and order" into what seemed "chaotic and freakish".

Towards the end of the nineteenth century a discipline emerged charged with the task of hastening and documenting the disappearance of the Other and unreason. Already dependent upon the Other and all that the Other entailed as a generic signifier of darkness, savagery and partiality, the discipline of anthropology surfaced armed with “guns” and formaldehyde. Marx had already sought to rid commodities of spirits and spectres² and, much later, Fukuyama sought to exorcise the spectre of Europe with his own announcement of the “good news”. In between anthropologists perfected what Malinowski termed their own “ethnographer’s magic” so that we (sic) might be plagued by nightmares no longer.

The anthropological project rested upon the assumption that the formation of a new ‘rational’ culture in Europe would steadily sweep away the vestigial remains of darkness from the world. A characteristic ‘turn’ in anthropological writing at this time was that of death. However, the Other was not to be mourned, for its death was both necessary and inevitable. The German ethnologist Adolf Bastian argued that the institutionalisation of ethnology as a scientific discipline in Germany did not require more field research, but rather the “founding and funding of ethnographic musea...[and] *documentation* of primitive societies dead or dying” (Fabian 1996). Likewise, Malinowski, in his ‘Foreword’ to *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* wrote “though at present, there is still a large number of native communities available for scientific study, within a generation or two, they...will have practically disappeared”. The Other that h(a)unted truth – threatening its unravelling, threatening, actually, to turn out the enlightenment – was to be collated, collected, displayed, documented, filmed and photographed, so that mankind (sic) might know something of the savagery from which it had emerged, and rest easy that the long night was finally over.

Through a strategic temporalisation of difference, experiences of the Other were experiences whose horizon became precisely delineated. The Other was constituted as that most paradoxical of objects through its classification as a living relic. In being removed in time from the anthropological Self, the experience of the Other could not be one of an encounter between co-selves, rather, the experience of the Other could only occur within limits set by the gaze of the knowing Self (Fabian 1996). The discipline of anthropology, then, orientated itself towards the past and entertained a curious affinity with other disciplines that concerned themselves with the past; namely, archaeology whose concern was so-called prehistory, and historiography whose primary focus was the written or ‘documented’ past. Accordingly, anthropology became engaged with a past that had, somehow, like the coelacanth, persisted into a present in which it did not belong.

Early British anthropologists sought to inscribe the Other in terms of immutable laws and general principles of social and intellectual evolution. These ‘laws’ corresponded and largely derived their legitimacy from the physical, chemical and biological laws that were thought to govern ‘nature’. For example in Herbert Spencer’s work, societies were akin to biological organisms, possessing distinct stages of maturity and complexity. As such, the differences between so-called tribal peoples and the industrial nation-states of Europe could be explained through recourse to a hierarchy of evolutionary stages which located the ‘civilised nation-states’ of Europe at the higher end of the scale and ‘primitive tribes’ lower down. In fact, the comparative method that defined the work of the early anthropologists was dependent upon such formal oppositions. These constituted the task of anthropology as, on the one hand, the construction of a record of obsolete cultures and, on the other, the arrival – through a process of logical elimination – at the origins of human cultural, economic, political and religious evolution.

² “The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour as long as they take the form of commodities, vanishes therefore, as soon as we come to other forms of production” (Marx 1974).

For early anthropologists such as Tylor and Frazer, the so-called civilised nations of the West represented the pinnacle of human social and intellectual evolution. History-as-reason consisted in the objective development or maturity of the rational intellect out of child-like beginnings – a position apparently legitimated by the fact that only the industrial-scientific nations of the West had achieved mastery over nature. Frazer began *The Golden Bough* with the thesis that magical beliefs and practices were founded upon a set of mistaken assumptions regarding cause and effect, specifically that ‘homeopathic magic’ worked according to the principle of ‘similarity’, and that ‘contagious magic’ operated according to the principle of ‘contact’. As such, technology and science – which had apparently established the true relations of cause and effect between phenomena – became a means for measuring, grading and hierarchising different cultures and societies through the determination of the ‘use-value’ of magical beliefs and practices. Thus, in the preface to the second edition of *The Golden Bough* (1900), J. G. Frazer wrote:

The comparative study of the beliefs and institutions of mankind is fitted to be much more than a means of satisfying an enlightened curiosity and of furnishing materials for the researches of the learned. Well handled, it may become a powerful instrument to expedite progress ... if it shows that much which we are wont to regard as solid rests on the sands of superstition rather than on the rock of nature. It is indeed a melancholy and in some respects thankless task to strike at the foundations of beliefs in which, as in a strong tower, the hopes and aspirations of humanity through long ages have sought a refuge from the storm and stress of life. Yet sooner or later it is inevitable that the battery of the comparative method should breach these venerable walls, mantled over with ivy and mosses and wild flowers of a thousand tender and sacred associations. At present we are only dragging the guns into position: they have hardly yet begun to speak (Frazer in Waardenburg 1999:253).

Frazer’s text begins by opposing knowledge that “rests on the sands of superstition” with knowledge that is built “on the rock of nature”. The former, “mantled over with ivy and mosses and wild flowers of a thousand tender and sacred associations” has the quality of a romantic dream or flight of fancy, while the latter, by contrast, is solid, substantial and, of course, ‘true’. However, this truth is, in the same moment, destabilised and unhinged through allusions to warfare (“battery” and “guns”) and can only ultimately legitimate itself through reference to superior military might and power. Yet, Edward Tylor had been equally blunt; at the end of his two-volume opus *Primitive Culture* he described anthropology as “a reformer’s science”. The task? To “expose the remains of crude old culture which have passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction”. Early anthropology, then, had set itself the task of excising unreason from the world, and understood itself as a pastoral discipline for the correction of the Other.

The ‘relativist’ turn in twentieth century anthropology seemed to question the accepted truths and assumptions upon which anthropology had been founded. Further, it appeared to destabilise the reason that had defined Western thought and activity for a century. Relativism – born of a functionalist mode of theory formation that constituted cultures and societies as hermetically sealed entities impervious to forces of transformation – decided not only to seal peoples in and insulate them from the ravages of ‘Western’ reason but appeared to suggest that the world was a kind of patch-work quilt made up of mutually incommensurable reasons. Here, then, I want to question the extent to which relativism actually constitutes a break with ‘pastoral power’.

Tapp’s article “The Hmong – Political Economy of an Illegal Crop” (1988) – which I take to be paradigmatic of a contemporary anthropological relativism – begins by stating that Hmong stand “at the crossroads between violent change and total destruction”. Tapp asks us to feel moved by their plight and to act on behalf of ‘the’ Hmong. He details the political and economic histories of Hmong poppy cultivation including the British and French colonial trade in opium

and the American and CIA opium trade that financed the anti-communist movement in Indo-China after World War II. He tells us many facts. The fact that poppies grow well even in poor soil, that opium swiddens can be used two or three times longer than those used for growing rice, that poppies always secure a good price, and the fact of increasing land scarcity and the failure of re-settlement and crop-substitution projects. By the end it becomes apparent that Hmong need to be insulated from predatory groups and interests in order for them to survive:

The amount [of opium] harvested by the Hmong of north Thailand is an insignificant percentage of the total crop of the Golden Triangle. Most opium is harvested in Burma and transported by KMT irregulars and other paramilitary forces through Thailand. Much of the opium produced by the Hmong themselves is sold through these organisations. Yet, while occasional seizures are made which are given enormous publicity, little or no attempt is made to prevent or curtail the activities of such organised traders. The reasons for this are political. The KMT remnants and other rebel groups such as the Shan United Army (SUA) have all received sanctuary on Thai soil during their struggle against the Burmese government. These right-wing organisations have in the past fulfilled important counter-insurgency functions in the areas which they control, on behalf of the Thai police forces and army. For political reasons no measures are taken to curtail the activities of these middlemen and producers. Instead all efforts are directed against the unfortunate, and poverty-stricken people of the hills, who are stigmatised and castigated as enemies of the nation, and unhealthy producers of a dangerous drug (Tapp 1988: 234-5).

Here, I want to consider whether Tapp's writings constitute a radical break with those of Spencer, Tylor and Frazer. Certainly, it points to a greater sensitivity to the economic and political marginalisation of minority peoples. But, is this 'sensitivity' part of an effort to articulate, in anthropology, a different kind of practice? Or does it simply inscribe a new kind of pastoral relationship? I would argue that if anthropology constitutes a form of pastoral power, then Tapp's 'anthropology of care' constitutes not a disruption of that form of power but its most recent elaboration. How, then, can 'we' re-think and re-make 'ourselves' as anthropologists, in such a way that we do not simply re-affirm pastoral power? Indeed, how can 'our work' as anthropologists interrogate both the beliefs and practices of those peoples among whom we do our work, but also those conventions, norms and rituals of knowing at work in our own societies?

In "Culture, Time and the Object of Anthropology", Johannes Fabian conceptualised fieldwork as an encounter and as a "*confrontation*", i.e. a kind of praxis that transforms both self and other selves:

[Fieldwork is] a kind of experience which is distinct from other kinds of social learning and from other kinds of life crises. 'Culture shock' only describes the effects of that experience, and even that imperfectly because shock admits of many degrees which need not at all correspond to the content of the experience whose effect is being described ... [Fieldwork is] not positive (directed to acquisition, internalisation) but negative (directed toward the apprehension of Otherness which is possible only through negation of Self and Same) ... It is a process which starts, to use a term more familiar than 'negative apprehension', with *confrontation* ... Research based on confrontation, even if it is carried out following a plan, a routine of daily tasks, cannot properly be conceived as 'systematic'. Notions such as the 'property space' of a subject matter, a 'set' of variables, or, indeed, a 'field', all connote a spatial pre-ordering of areas of knowledge to be occupied. If inquiry is thought to 'cover ground', scientific progress may be celebrated as a conquest (Fabian 1996:198-200).

What Fabian seems to be suggesting – especially through his emphasis on 'negativity' as the defining feature of 'the' confrontation with other selves – is that anthropological knowledge cannot be constituted in terms of the 'traditional' metaphors of 'light' and 'illumination'. For Fabian, 'knowledge' is not enlightening – rather it is unsettling and disturbing – indeed, it is

knowledge constituted through metaphors of 'darkness' that do not 'solve' or 'conclude' but remain partial and fragmentary.

Fabian's point seems to emphasise how the encounter or "*confrontation*" with other selves radically decentres the pastoralism of early anthropology. Moreover, it constructs fieldwork as a space which provides the possibility to "hear that which one does not already understand...[and] to challenge our own conceptions" (Chakrabarty 2000). Fieldwork, then, provides the possibility for a kind of 'limit-experience'.

Michel Foucault has had a profound impact on contemporary thought, especially on those intellectuals for whom research, reflection and writing are not concerned with the 'demonstration' of 'truths', but are instead concerned with the possibility for the emergence of a critical subject capable of articulating and appropriating new relations between things and with others. In *Discipline and Punish* he famously locates a series of discursive and physical penal practices through which human beings constitute themselves as both subjects and objects of knowledge. However *Discipline and Punish* is not a list of dates and names pertinent to the history of 'the prison'. Nor does it narrate a neat progression from 'savage' or 'inhuman' punishments to the 'reasoned' application of 'law' and the concern for the 'rehabilitation' of 'the criminal' constituted by the bourgeois nation-state. Rather, Foucault sets out to demonstrate that the notion of 'the criminal' is a product of certain procedures and rules necessary for the formation of a penal discourse charged with the reduction of that which exceeds the ordering practices of reason to the category of 'deviancy'. Critically, Foucault's work constitutes an attempt to intervene in this discursive 'field'. As such, his analyses of French penal practices began with the founding of the Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons (GIP) on February 8, 1971. The aim was to collect evidence about conditions inside French jails. The GIP, then, was not a 'passive' exercise in data-collection, and in *Remarks on Marx*, Foucault qualified this intervention in terms of a limit-experience:

When ... [*Discipline and Punish*] came out, various readers – particularly prison guards, and social workers, etc. – gave this singular judgement: "It is paralysing. There may be some correct observations, but in any case it certainly has its limits, because it blocks us, it prevents us from continuing our activities." My reply is that it is just that relation that proves the success of the work, proves that it worked as I had wanted it to. That is, it is read as an experience that changes us, that prevents us from always being the same, or from having the same kind of relationship with things and with others that we had before reading it. This demonstrates to me that the book expresses an experience that extends beyond my own. The book is merely inscribed in something that was already in progress; we could say that the transformation of contemporary man [sic] is in relation to his sense of self. On the other hand, the book also worked *for* this transformation; it has been, even if in a small way, an agent. That's it. This, for me, is an "experience-book", as opposed to a "truth-book" or a "demonstration-book" (Foucault 1991:41-2).

It is my contention that *fieldwork* is also a kind of limit-experience where self and other selves confront or encounter one another. The essentially unsettling nature of this encounter – an encounter that resists conventional modes of knowing – is a mutually transforming experience that decentres the knowing Self of pastoral anthropology. It is a transformation that understands the fieldwork site not as a space for the instruction of the Other, but as a place for the meeting of co-selves, that opens the possibility for, to quote Foucault once again, knowing "how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known" (1992).

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