NEXUS Vol. 7 (Supplement) 1990

# CRISIS, AUSTERITY AND METHODENSTREIT: Postgraduate Education in Canada a la Fun Du Siecle

Andrew P. Lyons
Wilfrid Laurier University

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the current predicament of Canadian anthropology in terms of its potential and the constraints that inhibit the realization of its possibilities. A general historical consideration of 'interpretive anthropology', as formulated in the American context, forms the basis for a call to 'moral nerve'.

## RÉSUME

L'auteur examine les principaux potentiels et limites de l'Anthropologie Canadienne contemporaine. Une revue historique de l'Anthropologie intérpretive Américaine constitue le contexte d'un appel au développement d'une critique morale.

## CRISIS AND AUSTERITY

I am more than a little concerned that I shall be unable to answer all the questions posited by the organizers of this conference. To begin with, I have not taught in a graduate programme since I left the United States in 1977. What little I have observed is based on the reporting of colleagues in other universities, some former students, and curricula vitae for non-existent jobs which arrive in our department offices. Anthropology in this country was still in its early stages when it was subjected to two simultaneous blows about fifteen years ago. The academic crunch has badly affected our discipline, because we have never enjoyed particularly high enrolments and we have never been an established part of the university curriculum. Both graduate and undergraduate departments are overworked and underfunded. Usually we teach less students than faculty members in other disciplines, but we undertake very many course preparations. There are

undergraduate programmes where fourth year honours courses are provided gratis or for cheap stipends; in one doctoral programme, faculty members' doctoral supervision is, or 'til recently was, undertaken in addition to a three course load each semester. Faculty's research potential and students' education both suffer. The level of grant support for research in the Humanities and Social Sciences is pathetic. Undertaking fieldwork implies considerable personal indebtedness. There are competent scholars with doctorates who cannot find entry jobs. The pay is poor, particularly at the bottom levels, and frequently initial appointments are of the revolving door, 'limited term' variety. When many vacancies do occur, as we are told they will, in about five years' time, it will be too late for some. Recruitment is even more difficult at the top ranks than at the bottom. The protectionist barriers erected more than a decade ago excluded foreign scholars at a time when Canadian Anthropology was just finding its feet. And so on.

This situation is lamentable if we assume, and we have a vested interest in so doing, that anthropologists collectively do make some contribution to the world of learning. Furthermore, there are certain social crises within Canada concerning which we should have more to say and still have much to do, e.g. the treatment of Canada's first populations (the South African press did tell the truth, in part, on this matter) and a racist immigration policy. Given that the present government poses as a friend of the poor and oppressed in all other countries but this one, it ought to be more interested than it is in the contribution of Social Anthropologists. We should be aware of our social and academic responsibility, which is to carry on with our work, however badly we are funded and however much we are misunderstood. The education we practice is not confined to the ivory tower. If we stay within its precincts, the world outside will be left to Philippe Rushton and his many silent supporters.[1]

## CRISIS AND METHODENSTREIT

One cannot help but feel that the most crucial, the most radical questions which Canadian Anthropology confronts are international rather than national in their nature. The traditional objects of anthropological inquiry, the alleged 'primitives', are supposedly being absorbed in the World System, if they have not already formed part of it for centuries. Furthermore, the imperial and neo-colonial power that sustained ethnography and permitted the production of so

much knowledge concerning cultural difference has significantly declined. From these political and social facts has emerged the current Methodenstreit in social anthropology: on the one side are the interpretive anthropologists, on the other side are the political economists and the sundry heirs of cultural ecology and neo-evolutionism.

Most of us possess a pellucid awareness of the differences between these two schools of thought. Most of us have read the quasi-canonical and tractarian simplifications of Marvin Harris (1969 and 1979) concerning the split between 'idealists' and 'materialists' in anthropology, and know that the old wines are periodically poured into new bottles. Nonetheless, we should consider that certain elements, epistemes or sentiments are shared by both rival discourses, that they reflect a common uneasiness, and alike provoke a perturbation, a more than ephemeral decentering of our vision. In this sense, such labels as 'political economy' or 'postmodernism' are more than mere 'fardles and facions,' and we perforce disagree with the arguments so intelligently advanced by Philip Carl Salzman in a recent article in the AAA Newsletter.

Anthropology's 'Fall', our collective representations concerning our loss of innocence, may be traced to the era of the Vietnam War. Since that time many of us, rightly or wrongly, have conducted ethnographic research under a burden of guilt and written ethnography which celebrates our shame. The more mundane fact that so many of us must bow and scrape before bureaucrats, who traffic daily in the mess colonialism left behind, constitutes a further social constraint on our production of knowledge. It is ironic that Foucault should have made us aware of the relationship between power and knowledge in the production of discourse at a time when much of that power is vanishing. Whether in the Philippines or in West Africa, the ethnographer knows that in the event of crisis he or she can no longer run to the District Commissioner and proclaim, "Civis Britannicus sum".

Words such as 'perturbation', 'Fall', 'decentering' may connote a shift in anthropological practices. As Marcus and Fischer (1986) and many others have noted, anthropological theory in the nineteen-eighties has for the first time made the fieldwork enterprise, rather than the reality 'out there', its focal concern. Within the neighbouring discipline of sociology, practitioners of critical theory, phenomenology, ethnomethodology and conversational analysis have raised some similar questions. Political economists problematize the setting, the mis en scène, of the ethnographic encounter, attack the myths of cultural isolation, the neglect of material causes, the

obsession with synchronicity. Interpretive anthropologists often share these concerns, but it is less their wish to dissolve anthropology in the interdisciplinary practice of dialectical materialism. Rather they problematize the production of the text, the way in which the ethnographic event is inscribed, the role of previous ethnographers (the 'anxiety of influence'), the current ethnographer and his/her informants in the production of narrative. One is repeatedly informed that ethnographers should be self-reflexive and that ethnography should be polyvocal (e.g. Tyler 1987:204; Marcus and Fischer 1986:71). Indigenous ethnography, even when it is not anthropology properly-so-called, should be given its due. The very model of a postmodern anthropologist will empower the informant and allow him/her a share in the creation of the text. Whether or not these doubtless laudable aims are fully realizable is quite another matter. They have already led to some fertile (e.g. Pratt 1986) and some dreadful re-readings of ethnographic classics, to some admirable and a few wretched ethnographies. Obsessively blurring their genres, the interpretive school have dissolved anthropology in an interdisciplinary stew, composed of existentialist philosophy, varieties of critical theory, and diverse forms of deconstructionist criticism. A friend of mine was asked by his examiners why they should be interested in Husserl, and responded that, should they read Husserl, they would understand that he had demonstrated the futility of our discipline.

A cogent critic of recent trends in social anthropology, Tom Beidelman (1986:10), has spoken of a 'failure of moral nerve'. By this structure he presumably implies that authority and authorship are, willy nilly, the obligations of the ethnographer. In truth ethnographic morality has several sources, and there is more than one kind of it. A Hobbesian, or, at its most permissive, a Lockean view of social contract pervades many theoretical writings and is dominant in many ethnographies. One can obviously perceive such a vision in the writings of many structural-functionalists (e.g. Radcliffe-Brown and Fortes), but it is present in many other places too (e.g. Leslie White's explanation of the incest taboo). We may not, they may not live in the best of all worlds, but there is nonetheless an apprehensible fit between social institutions. Furthermore, anthropology, the reformer's science, the realization of the Comtean vision, may embrace and comprehend such institutions.

For all of that, the ghost of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the aura of the Second Discourse, have haunted Social Anthropology from its very beginnings. The primitivist impulse long predates the first stirrings of the wind in the palm trees around Malinowski's tent.

The non-ethnographic pastoral long predates Rousseau (Lucretius' De Rerum Natura, Horace, Ovid and Virgil), but the Swiss savant's version was authoritative (Rosseau 1755). It has been 'misread' and rewritten so many times. Implicit in it is not only a critique of all existing social contracts but an awareness that inequality is the paradoxical effect of perfectibility, that unjust power is the product of knowledge. Anthropology itself bears guilt by more than chance association. It is part of the Comtean nightmare, Behemoth, the tool of instrumental reason. The Rousseauesque vision is merely a subtext in classic ethnographies such as Argonauts of the Western Pacific and The Nuer. It is stronger in the early writings of Margaret Mead, underlying the notion of cultural critique. It is very strong now in the work of political economists who reincarnate Morgan's primitive communalism and the works of the early Marx, and in the writings of the interpretive school -- they surely have diagnosed a malady to which they themselves (and the author of this paper) are subject. It is no accident that Tristes Tropiques is one of the most quoted works in postmodern anthropology.

We mean to imply that the anti-scientific impulse in modern anthropology (less strong arguably among the political economists) has serious implications, because it undermines the comparative method which was the basis of Social Anthropology. Again we must refer to Beidelman's worries about our moral nerve. If members of our discipline can, as part of our professional discourse, engage in impassioned debate over land claims and the morality of museum exhibits (see the debate between Trigger and Ames in Culture 1988, I:81-88), we are not terrible reprobates. Beidelman is telling us that our good intentions are paving our way to an academic hell. Somewhere on our quest we have forgotten what treasure we set out to find.

Naive positivism and the search for exotica are quite unfashionable enterprises now. The latter was decried by the structural-functionalists and the former waned along with them. Those enterprises did result in a number of discoveries and insights; they raised many questions that we still cannot answer. Their legacy is taken-for-granted in our discourse: dual symbolic classification, the prestation, the tripartite structure of the rite de passage, liminality and symbolic inversion, de Saussure's notion of linguistic value and the relativity of segmentary lineage systems. So many conundra have been left for us to solve: the structure and meaning of myth, the nature of inequality in pre-capitalist societies, the couvade, joking relationships, divine kingship, the significance of relationship terminologies, the wider significance of cross-cousin

marriage, the troubling detritus of Levy-Bruhl and Whorf. These are not all antiquarian problems. In sum, we are talking about no grand scheme to discover cross-culturally-valid laws of social behaviour, but rather we are discussing the precious little we know about shared meanings within traditional societies and ideal types of social behaviour, what Toulmin has called 'useful analytical notions', which may provide some clues as to the significance of cultural patterns which recur across space and time. The absence of such discussion from the present dialogue is bothersome.

Erik Wolf's Europe and the People Without History (1982) is regarded as one of the most useful books of the present decade. It has supposedly laid to rest any functionalist notions that anthropologists ever have, or ever could have, established early contact with cultures which were intact and relatively unaffected by the forces of world history and European cultural hegemony.

Wolf's book does not, however, merge anthropology with history. Whereas a prior generation of anthropologists neglected the dimension of colonial power in their accounts of other cultures, Wolf quite simply omits the other cultures. The voice of the conquered is still only a whisper, dimly heard only when Wolf cites such authors as Jan Vansina, who have carefully scrutinized indigenous oral histories.

The omissions (sometimes unavoidable) in Wolf's account are as nothing compared to some of the cruder versions of dependency theory and world system theory. In our own research, that of my wife, Harriett Lyons, and myself, on the development of the mass media in Benin City, Nigeria, we tested inter alia, the notions of cultural imperialism, media dependency and 'Cocacolonization' which were developed by Herbert Schiller (1969), Ariel Dorman (1975), and others. We found that Cocacolonization, the spread of capitalist values through mass media products, has definite limits. Nigerians do watch The Jeffersons, Dallas and The Benny Hill Show, Sanford and Son and SWAT, but they decode them in their own ways. Not all decodings are aberrant by the standards of our own culture, but some are very different. The most popular programmes in Benin City were local dramas produced on limited budgets. We had to be trained to decode them. They incorporate many elements of the oral tradition, of verbal and ritual performance. To understand them, and even to decode the sermons of local televangelists, we had to comprehend local witchcraft beliefs, forms of symbolic inversion such as the masquerade, old and new beliefs and practices concerning gender and patriarchy, and a worldview which is neither totally enchanted (in Max Weber's sense) nor totally disenchanted. Such

evocations of tradition are not sentimental allusions to the past. They are rather reinventions, reformulations of tradition, a form of verbal action concerning contemporary problems such as class formation, threats to the patriarchal family and the national economic crisis. Any model of cultural imperialism and dependency which does not treat of such social facts is woefully one-sided and deficient.

This last argument implicitly declares our own affinities to the interpretive school, but there are problems with that discourse too. Some of the ethnographies that Marcus and Fischer view as model experiments are obviously flawed. Crapanzano's Tuhami (1980) reveals much more of the ethnographer than the subject, and Moroccan culture is a mere chiaroscuro. Despite Shostak's valiant efforts, Nisa all too often sounds like Tonto in The Lone Ranger: "We lived, eating meat, lived and lived. Then it was finished" (1981:90; see also 71, 283, 184). The achievement of polyvocality is an artifact of successful translation which is a most difficult task. Much interpretative theory (Geertz rather than James Clifford) begs rethinking. As my wife and colleague has observed, Geertz' Works and Lives (1988) is an unusual demonstration of what Harold Bloom calls "the anxiety of influence", insofar as the author attacks not only his ancestors (Levi-Strauss, Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard) but also his progeny (Dwyer, Crapanzano, Rabinow). Attacks on style are only meaningful if they are also attacks on substance. Geertz' own African transparencies would be more informative if we learnt something about the Anuak from them that we did not glean from Evans-Pritchard, but nothing of that kind occurs.

It could well be said that it is a little unfair to attack other scholars for undertaking tasks that are nigh impossible, or for doing what they want to do and not what we want them to do. Were we to grant those points, we would still be concerned about the effect of recent developments on the profession. At several recent meetings, the halls have been filled to overflowing, echoing loudly to the polyvocal discourse of the popes of postmodernism. At the same time, established scholars have presented serious ethnographic research to audiences of derisory smallness in tiny rooms. Colleagues tell me that in many American graduate schools, students can and will discuss Writing Culture, but they do not know what cross-cousin marriage is nor do they care. We should, of course, be able to discuss both topics. Indeed, the late Sir Edmund Leach's work signifies the relationship between them.

The above remarks are a plea that we do not forget to take care of business. We should learn, utilize and refine some well worn

concepts, and even invent some new ideal types, some more analytical notions. Beginning with the late Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, feminist anthropologists have been doing all this for some while. The best feminist scholarship does not merely inform us how many calories women expend in the field, rather it explains the meaning of their own work in their own lives expressed in their own voice. Feminist scholarship in the present decade may be succeeding because its practitioners are neither guilty nor ashamed. They are angry.

There are some dreadful dangers in a 'we are all guilty' stance in the face of atrocities. An obvious danger is an obsession with self, a new excuse to deny the other voice, or appropriate those utterances which invoke our own preoccupations. A more (or perhaps less) subtle danger is the shifting of blame from those who are more guilty than we. Lena Wertmuller's film Seven Beauties, part of the same post-Sixties tendency as interpretive anthropology, blames everyone but Hitler for Nazi atrocities (for a similar critique of Wertmuller see Rosenfeld 1980:166-170).

However insensitive Evans-Pritchard's account of his incursion into Ethiopia may have been, however arrogant the paucity of commas in his "Akobo realism", he was, at most, a footnote to history. Mussolini occupies a notable position of Derridian absence in Geertz' appraisal. Perhaps the most worrisome feature of confessional anthropology is the invitation it offers for the return of a self-important, White Man's Burden, approach to the post-colonial world.

In one sense the belatedness of Canadian Anthropology may be something of a blessing. We undoubtedly have individual, national, and class guilts to expunge; professionally we may be free to build a collective endeavour which can learn from the past without being mired in it.

## NOTES

Philippe Rushton, a psychologist at the University of Western Ontario, argues that certain psychological attributes are racially determined. His propositions, which bear a striking similarity to the eugenics of the nineteenth century, have sparked animated debate in Canada, in both public and academic arenas (EDITOR).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ames, Michael
1988 The Liberation of Anthropology: a Rejoinder to Professor Trigger's 'A Present of Their Past?' In Culture, VIII (1):pp. 81-86.

Beidelman, Thomas
1986 Moral Imagination in Kaguru Modes of Thought. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Clifford, James
1986 Partial Truths. In Writing Culture, J. Clifford and G. Marcus (eds.), pp. 1-26. Berkeley: University of California Press.

1988 The Predicament of Culture. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Clifford James and George E. Marcus (eds.)
1986 Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Crapanzano, Vincent
1980 Tuhami: Portrait of Moroccan. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Dorfman, Ariel and Armand Mattelart
1975 How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic. Translated by D. Kunzle. N.Y: International General.

Geertz, Clifford
1980 Blurred Genres. In American Scholar 49:165-179.

1988 Works and Lives. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Harris, Marvin
1969 The Rise of Anthropological Theory. N.Y: Thomas Crowell.

1979 Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture. New York: Random House.

Lèvi-Strauss, Claude
1975 Tristes Tropiques. Translated by J. and D. Weightman. New York: Athenaeum (original 1955).

Marcus, George E. and Michael M.J. Fischer
1986 Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Pratt, Mary Louise
1986 Fieldwork in Common Places. In Writing Culture, J. Clifford and G. Marcus (eds.), pp. 27-50. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rosenfeld, Alvin H.
1980 A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature. Bloomington and Indianopolis: Indiana University Press.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques
1964 The First and Second Discourses. Translated by R. and J. Masters. New York: St. Martin's Press (original 1751 and 1755).

Schiller, Herbert I.
1969 Mass Communications and American Empire. New York: A.M. Kelley.

Shostak, Marjorie
1981 Nisa. New York: Vintage Books (originally published by Harvard University Press).

Trigger, Bruce G.
1988 Reply to Michael Ames. In Culture, VII (1):87-88.

Tyler, Stephen A.
1987 The Unspeakable: Discourse, Dialogue, and Rhetoric in the Postmodern World. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Wolf, Eric
1982 Europe and the People without History. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.