Self-Interpretation, Agency, and the Objects of Anthropology: Reflections on a Genealogy

WEBB KEANE

Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan

If there is anything that exemplifies a certain common style in ethnographically-oriented approaches to culture and society today, and sets them apart from other kinds of social science, it is the habit, irritating to colleagues in some other disciplines, frustrating to students, deemed perverse by potential funders, and bewildering to the public, of responding to explanations with the remark, "We need to complicate the story." The words "reductionist" and "essentializing" are brandished with scorn. One important perspective is expressed by this remark by Jean and John Comaroff, two influential anthropologists with solid roots in longterm fieldwork, the sobriety of British social anthropology, and the tough-minded realism of the Marxist tradition: ethnography "refuses to put its trust in techniques that give more scientific methods their illusory objectivity: their commitment to standardized, a priori units of analysis, for example, or their reliance on a depersonalizing gaze that separates subject from object" (1992:8). These words, offered almost in passing, take a host of important arguments as settled. One is that it is no longer in much dispute that cultural anthropology is not merely at an "immature" stage, en route to something more akin to natural science. Most significant, perhaps, is the assumption that the separation of subject from object can be understood only in negative terms, that to say that a field of knowledge "depersonalizes" is *ipso facto* to discredit it. Yet in their own ethnographic and historical work the Comaroffs take their empirical materials very seriously and do *not* wholly reject the separation of subject from object—how could they? What is at issue, rather, is what kinds of "objects" and "sub-

jects," and what categories of analysis and comparison, are epistemologically appropriate and ethically legitimate for the study of social actions and self-understandings.

The ultimate aim of this essay is to propose that we rethink the problem of "objectification" in the study of culture and society. A productive understanding of objectification should go beyond the commonplace critiques of scientism or ideological reification. It would take seriously the materiality of signifying practices and the ubiquity and necessity of conceptual objectification as a component of human action and interaction. But first I want to step back for a look at the way in which this point has come to be obscured for us. I begin by revisiting some old arguments about the nature of culture, meaning, and social science that have become a relatively taken-for-granted background shared by opponents in more recent debates about power, identities, and the observer. If, as I suggest, ethnographic knowledge has always been marked by a tension between epistemologies of estrangement and of intimacy, the latter has increasingly claimed the epistemological and moral high ground in much cultural anthropology, especially in America. The result is a number of familiar dilemmas about incommensurability, comparison, translation, and the possibilities for understanding. Now, simply to dismiss these (perhaps attributing them to supposedly occult forces like "post-modernism") and call for a return to earlier disciplinary verities is hardly a solution. This article focuses on the themes of anti-determinism, meaning, agency, and particularism as they have marked American cultural anthropology in contrast to more scientistic disciplines. I want to suggest that there is more underlying unity across at least some of the battle-lines than is commonly recognized, as fractured, factionalized, and fraught as anthropology presently is.[1] But this unity is obscured not least because its roots in certain intuitions about freedom and agency are so little examined. Although the current emphasis on intimacy and engagement, and the suspicion of objectification, are associated with post-colonial critique, practice theory, deconstruction, power/knowledge, and identity politics, I argue that its roots are deeper. To the extent that certain well-trod paths in anthropology converge with other anti-foundationalist disciplines in an intellectual world informed more, say, by Nietzsche than by Comte, by the later Wittgenstein than Chomsky, they do so from a distinctive angle.

The first part of this essay sketches out some of the ways in which the

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[1] The preoccupation with cultural meaning and positionality is most elaborated in the American academy (the chief examples in Rosaldo's 1989 attack on "objectivism," for instance, were British and French). Writing from the perspective of British social anthropology, Kuper (1999) traces this distinctiveness to the division of social scientific labor mapped out by Parsons, Kluckhohn, and Kroeber in the 1950s, which encouraged anthropology to grant too much to "culture." By repeatedly labeling the result "idealism," however, Kuper tends to reproduce the very materialist-idealist opposition that should be in question. Although the focus in the present article is on work based in America, given the flow of ideas and persons across national boundaries, it is impossible to maintain strict distinctions among national traditions.

Boasian, Weberian, and Durkheimian understandings of the objects and categories of socio-cultural knowledge were transformed by the interpretive and symbolic turns in cultural anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s. It then looks at two exemplary contemporary critiques of the culture concept, by Lila Abu-Lughod, and by James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta. Although both critiques are animated by problems of power, knowledge, and agency, they work toward opposite ends of the spectrum of intimacy and estrangement. Yet they share certain assumptions about meaning and determinism not only with each other, but with those whom they attack. These assumptions are shaped by an underlying, often unspoken, ethic that stresses the value of human self-determination and opposes it both to reductionism, and to mere contingency.

This essay does not pretend to be a history nor does it claim to be inclusive. Rather, it is an interested reading, which tries to draw out certain themes that run through the effort to place people's self-interpretations at the center of study, and the privileging of intimacy over estrangement as a source of legitimate understanding. By retracing the logic of some of the earlier arguments about objectivism and "the particular," I hope to clarify their contribution to the present moment. If the central part of this paper focuses on the so-called symbolic and interpretive turns in America, it is because their enormous impact, in light of the dominance of scientism, positivism, and functionalisms elsewhere in the social sciences, is what most needs to be understood. It does, however, begin with the intuition that many of the contemporary debates can take place, their terms of relevance making sense to the participants, only to the extent that they are predicated on certain shared assumptions and even ethical motives evident in those earlier generations. If anthropology is to make a difference at the convergence among disciplines like history, cultural criticism, sociology, and others, it must understand the genealogical peculiarities it brings into the mix. By reflecting on them, anthropological work may better take responsibility not only for its ethics but also its concepts.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE PARTICULARS

For proponents of nomothetic models of explanation, much of cultural anthropology is vitiated by excessive particularity. Almost forty years ago, Marvin Harris, who advocated a positivistic science of cultural evolution, complained that "there emerged a view of culture that exaggerated all the quixotic, irrational, and inscrutable ingredients in human life. Delighting in diversity of pattern, anthropologists sought out divergent and incomparable events. . . . By emphasizing inscrutable values, vain prestige, irrational motives, they discredited the economic interpretation of history. Anthropology came increasingly to concern itself with idiographic phenomena, that is, with the study of the unique and the nonrepetitive aspects of history" (1968:1).

Although the complaint concerns the American scene of an earlier generation, a similar objection has been expressed by scholars of very different per-

spectives and generations, from contemporary France (Sperber 1996) to the England of the 1950s, when the structuralist Edmund Leach remarked that "Most of my colleagues are giving up the attempt to make comparative generalizations; instead they have begun to write impeccably detailed historical ethnographies of particular peoples" (1959:1). If anthropology can look too particularistic from various points of view, it also seems to persist in whatever it is doing that provokes these complaints.

Some, of course, simply take this condition to be a symptom of confusion, incoherence, or worse. But I think we need to take it seriously as an approach to knowledge. There is something about what anthropology has been doing that, for all the shifts of paradigm and the fires of internal critique, continues to produce *both* the particularistic symptom *and* the theorizing complaint. If this is a dialectic, it is recurrently threatened with collapse when either side—what might be called the epistemologies of estrangement, and of intimacy—is favored at the expense of the other. Although the American academy has most elaborated the side of intimacy, the basic problems are of more general relevance.

The authority of ethnographic particularity for contemporary anthropologists is famously exemplified by Clifford Geertz, who asserted a generation ago that what anthropologists *do* is ethnography (rather than, say, theory-building), which is "microscopic," and that "the important thing about anthropology's findings" (and not just its methods or data) "is their complex specificness, their circumstantiality" (1973a:21–23; see also Ortner 1995). But the epistemological and ethical claims of concrete particularity were already laid out with remarkable vividness in 1887 by Franz Boas, before he became one of the founding figures of anthropology in the United States.[2] Like the historian, and in contrast to the natural scientist, Boas states, the geographer does not seek general laws, but rather "the thorough understanding of the phenomena" (1940:641) as singular facts. Not only is this interest in what actually exists for its own sake a legitimate alternative to the formulation of laws, the two are even antithetical: it is precisely *because* "he" takes an interest in them that the historian "is unwilling to consider" peoples and nations "as subject to stringent laws" (1940:642). Boas here makes two distinct points at once. First, he poses as alternatives the taking of the singular as evidence for a law and the singular as worthy of attention for its own sake. Second, these are not merely perspectives but are in conflict, for only when peoples are taken for their own sake can they be seen as agents and thus not subject to laws.[3] Thus Boas can be read ei-

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[2] For the intellectual background to and appreciation of the significance of this essay, see the articles in Stocking 1996.

[3] The academic discipline of history has, of course, been defined by a similar sense of particularity (e.g. Mink 1987), but the terms of relevance have been different, since they have tended to be given in advance by the terms of national identities (Chakrabarty 2000; Cohn 1980). As any American publisher will tell you, books on the Civil War require no theoretical justification, since

ther to emphasize historical contingency, or human agency—and, I will suggest, it is the latter that has tended to prevail.

But Boas makes two further, mutually implicated claims as well. In contrast to the physicist, who analytically resolves the phenomenon into its elements, the geographer takes "The whole phenomenon, and not its elements" as the object of study. Yet the geographer's phenomena have no objective unity at all, but form "an incidental conglomerate" (geology, meteorology, and so forth); "Their connection seems to be subjective, originating in the mind of the observer" (1940:642). By contrast, the physicist, in comparing elements taken out of context, "loses sight altogether of the spot from which he started" (1940:646). Our interest is a matter of contingency: the motive of cosmography is "love for the country we inhabit" (1940:647) in contrast to the naturalist who views the whole world disinterestedly. The Grand Canyon is interesting because it is exists for me, as part of *my world*. And its weather, color, age, and size—each of which could be analytically distinguished for purposes of comparison to those of other physical entities—form an object only insofar as they are unified within my experience. That is, the very unity of the geographer's object of study is conditional on the situated character of human experience, which is what *motivates* the interest in the object in the first place.

This is a very peculiar kind of knowledge, and, as I will suggest below, it encounters serious dilemmas that are both epistemological (what kind of starting point can something as problematic as "experience" possibly offer?) and ethical (whose "country" is this anyway?). But I want to propose that in this foundational moment Boas named something distinctive about a kind of knowing that might be sought by a human science which survived the demise of his own school, and that pre-disposed it toward the anti-foundationalist thought of the twentieth century. First, however, I turn to the symbolic and interpretive turns of the 1960s and 1970s.

CULTURE, CONTEXT, AND THE ENDS OF ACTION

From the 1960s onwards, an anti-reductionist reaction increasingly set the anthropological agenda in America. Here I want to trace just a few themes through certain texts, with particular attention to the unlikely convergence among structuralism, Boasian culturalism, symbolic anthropology, and the interpretive turn, which developed Boas' interest in freedom at the expense of contingency.[4] Mar-

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the topic is interesting to their audience in its own right. By contrast, anthropologists traditionally wrote about places that (as one editor told me) "no one cares anything about."

   [4] For reviews of this period see Knauft 1996, Kuper 1999, Marcus and Fisher 1986, and Ortner 1984. Especially relevant for the issues I discuss here are the contemporaneous developments—too complex to cover here—in the articulation of material forces and consciousness (influenced by Althusser 1971; Gramsci 1971; and Williams 1977; cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985), sociological phenomenology (influenced by Schutz 1932), symbolic interactionism (Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974; Mead 1934), the ethnography of speaking (Bauman and Sherzer 1974; Hymes 1975), and the work of Foucault (e.g. 1971; 2000).

shall Sahlins is an exemplary figure with whom to start because he himself made the transition from a nomothetic model of science, and because he offered a rebuttal of positivism and functionalism that did not require one to abandon an idea of objective knowledge. Moreover, his appropriation of structuralism manifests the sea-change undergone by French thought in the American context, as its positivistic potential was muted in favor of the symbolic turn.

The study of linguistic sound systems by Boas (1910) and Edward Sapir (1925), and Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralism as elaborated by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962), showed that entities which, in strictly empirical terms, seem to be the identical, may in fact have quite different functions when analyzed in the context of different sound systems. It follows that no sound can *even be identified* independently of the linguistic system that specifies its relevant features. Taking this as foundational, Sahlins offers a critical difference from his teachers and contemporaries such as Marvin Harris (1968), Julian Steward (1949), or Leslie White (1949), who were trying to create a scientific anthropology. The difference does *not* concern the nature of the material world, causality, or the hope for objectivity. Rather, it lies in the conditions for establishing identity among observed entities. The argument from language forms a direct challenge to the possibility of specifying social or cultural units across the board. This kind of analysis depends on a concept of context that presumes three things, namely, that languages are best understood as total systems, that they are clearly bounded from one another, and that the units (being only "arbitrarily" connected to the object world) have no functionality apart from that of the overall system of which they are a part.

Much of Sahlins' writing is a defense and elaboration of these points.[5] Now, since it is common for critics to label him a "cultural determinist," he would seem to present an especially hard case for my claim that human self-determination has been a core value in American cultural anthropology. It is not my purpose to rehash the many debates about his work, but simply to point out the extent to which it offers a series of arguments against any purported "external" determinations of cultural form such as biology, ecology, or economics. Even before his full turn to structuralism, he was already arguing (1968) that some societies have opted out of the maximization of material gain in favor of greater leisure time, and therefore cultures are not adaptive according to a single standard of utility or rational choice. Culture is thus in essence excessive (it goes beyond the demands of reproduction) and irrational (since it defines the terms by which things are valued as ends, it cannot be explained in terms of mean-ends rationality). It manifests human self-creation at the level of communities. If this point has become difficult to see, it is in part because the very idea of collectivities has been put in question in contemporary America.

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[5] His later turn to history (e.g. Sahlins 1985; 2000) can be seen as an effort to reconcile the autonomy represented at the level of culture with orders of autonomy (e.g. "individual") and contingency (e.g. "event"), viewed as different from but not contradictory to it.

Sahlins' attack on determinism is linked to a second, logically independent, assertion, that cultures can be understood as ethical or aesthetic unities. Sahlins himself attributes his view of culture as a unified ethos to Alfred Kroeber's (1917) "superorganic," that which is distinctively human by virtue of not having "organic" or biological determinants. It is thus ironic, in view of later attacks on cultural holism in the name of agency, that it is precisely this unity which was supposed to provide humans with their independence from external determination. It is in the nature of moral or aesthetic ends that they impose a unity on the diverse activities to which they provide guidance.[6]

In Sahlins' work, holism helps explain culture's non-utilitarian character. Culture cannot be a thing of "shreds and patches" (Lowie 1920:441), because those could never provide a context that would give coherence to ultimate ends. The underlying assumption is the relative underdetermination of significance. And this in turn is associated with an ontological distinction between material and conceptual that is already evident, for example, both in Kroeber and in Saussure's doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign. That interpretation of material reality is mediated conceptually had become a commonplace. But the symbolic does not simply mediate *reference* to the things that exist in the world (a system of categories that tells us this is blue, that green, or this a wink, that a twitch). More than that, it facilitates questions of *ends* and their value. Sahlins' "culture," taken as existential stances toward life, seeks to provide an account of ends. It is meant to show, for instance, that economic maximization is a choice (one rejected by his "original affluent society" [1968]), not a given, something the West is driven toward not by the facts-of-the-matter, but by an underlying vision of humans as "imperfect creature[s] of need and desire" (2000:453–54).

CULTURE IN ITS OWN TERMS

The symbolic and interpretive turns are perhaps most commonly identified with Victor Turner (1967), Mary Douglas (1966), and Clifford Geertz (1973a; 1973b), and arguments for irreducible cultural specificity are found well beyond them (e.g. Louis Dumont 1966). I draw here on David Schneider because of the polemical sharpness and explicitness with which he articulated some of the more radical criticisms of comparison, and displayed the conceptual links among particularism, totality, and cultural value.

Schneider's attack on structural-functionalism involves five logical steps. First is an attack on superficial empiricism and the production of simplistic

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[6] There is clearly much more to be said on the subject of holism in anthropology. For one thing, the emergence of the anthropological culture concept was roughly coeval with nineteenth-century formulations of national identity, and the Romantic visions of a lost unity to be found behind existing fragments. But more generally, as Martin Jay has observed of the idea of the more encompassing concept of totality, it has "enjoyed a privileged place in the discourse of Western culture. . . . resonating with affirmative connotations" (1984:21).

models. Second, he challenged the idea that societies lend themselves to scientific comparison because they fall into objectively given types. Third, if societies are not natural things, then the categories by which they had heretofore been compared must be ethnocentric. Fourth, if the categories are not universal, then any analysis that uses them is taking its data out of context, and instead (fifth), the appropriate context within which to make sense of cultural categories is "the cultural system." None of these steps logically requires the subsequent one. For instance, the first criticism alone could simply have led to a call for better categories and more complex models. The third could have led him to construct Weberian ideal types for analytic purposes. Instead, Schneider ends up discrediting categories, models, generalities, and comparison altogether.

The reasons for this can be seen by considering the second step, exemplified in the statement "It is too late in the history of the social sciences to think we can go out among societies and, by keeping our eyes open, sort them out into their natural classes" (1965:78). Where neo-positivism would jettison the socio-cultural level of explanation in the name of sound methods, Schneider sought to preserve the level of explanation by abandoning an inappropriate method. Indeed, he writes as if this were a foregone conclusion. The attack on empiricism as ethnocentric and thus unrealistic (that is, not true to ethnographic particulars) became an attack on sociological comparison.

Instead, Schneider maintained that anthropology's purpose is the study of cultures, as "different conceptual schemes of what life is and how it should be lived" (1972:44). Notice here the implicit role of the normative: cultures are concerned with how life *should* be lived. Such a definition seems to express an underlying commitment to the empirical study of self-determination, insofar as cultures manifest a generic capacity to *decide* how to live. But in this view, the normative is above all *conceptual* in status—indeed, Schneider eventually took a strong position against any cultural determination of action (1976:202–3). Formed, like Geertz, in Talcott Parsons' milieu, Schneider presumed a clear distinction between social and cultural systems and insisted that culture was distinct from actual behavior.[7] In the struggle to distinguish social from natural science, and to escape functionalism and determinism, the value-orientation I have noted was often neglected in favor of concepts. What is important about culture, here, is that it imposes meaningful (and, by implication, arbitrary) categories on an otherwise meaningless and unorganized world. This is one reason why culture came to be identified, for some, with structure and in sharp opposition to agency. As Geertz quoted W. H. Auden, to exemplify his anti-functionalist view of culture: "Poetry makes nothing happen" (1973b:443).

With the destruction of the cross-cultural category "kinship," Schneider

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[7] Note that the particularistic argument was not confined to the Americans. For instance, in England, Rodney Needham (1962) drew similar conclusions from his Durkheimian readings of structuralism.

(1972) produced one template for post-modern particularisms within anthropology. Cultural categories for Schneider could only be understood in the context of the entire "cultural system." Though he was no structuralist, the logic is close to that of the arbitrary sign. Thus kinship or gender categories, for instance, cannot be compared across cultures because the apparent biological referents do not reflect their articulation with other components of a given culture. It is at this juncture, in justifying the autonomy, relatively undetermined character, and holism of cultures, that the potentially opposed forces of symbolic anthropology and structuralism made common cause. Schneider and Sahlins differed on much, but they shared an underlying vision that human projects are more than aleatory *only to the extent that* they are identified with a cultural, and thus collective, enterprise. As I will suggest below, subsequent critics of the concept of culture attacked its totalizing character, but they commonly did so on the anti-empiricist and anti-determinist grounds that were established by these earlier arguments. And herein lies one basis for the more radical conclusion that cultural meanings are irreducible, and therefore potentially incommensurable and untranslatable (see Chakrabarty 2000; Povinelli 2001).

METALANGUAGES OF AGENCY

What kind of knowledge ought we to hope for from this? Perhaps the most conventional answer was a richer access to "meanings." One of the founding statements for this approach is Geertz's appropriation of Gilbert Ryles' "thick description" (1973a) for anthropology and his image of the anthropologist reading a cultural text over the native's shoulder (1973b; see also Ricoeur 1971). The debates about this are well known. But I want here to draw out an aspect of these "meanings" that is sometimes neglected, their implicit relationship to action. The philosopher Charles Taylor, in his contribution to Rabinow and Sullivan's seminal volume, *Interpretive Social Science* (1987, originally 1979), gives an especially clear account of what that "text" is doing for the person's capacity to be an agent. I want to suggest that a critical reading of this account can usefully be brought to bear on subsequent critiques, especially on the assumptions they make about the necessarily malign effects of "objectification." If the interpretive turn was attacked from one side for lacking the rigor of natural science, it has increasingly been attacked from another side for objectifying and essentializing culture. But what Taylor's account should make clear, whatever its shortcomings, is that we can understand the object of interpretation to be not categories and meanings *per se* but rather the very capacity for agency that they mediate. By extension, we can see one opening to other social dimensions of power.

Taylor defines a text as a metalanguage, an expression that captures the same meaning as some original "text analogue."[8] This meaning is not simply se-

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[8] I leave aside here the questions raised by the relation between "meaning" and "expression" (see Davidson 1974; Putnam 1975; Quine 1969).

mantic or expressive, and Geertz's portrayal of culture as something like a Shakespearian drama read over the native's shoulder turns out to be a poor illustration, as do many efforts in more recent cultural studies to link cultural forms directly to political positions. Rather, Taylor's account of "the meaning of a situation for an agent" (1987:42) centers on the purposiveness and the self-consciousness (and implicit bracketing of contingency) that distinguish action from mere behavior, and hearkens back to Max Weber's (1968) definition of the proper object of interpretive social science as meaningful action.

What kind of object of knowledge is this? For Taylor, "descriptions [of action] are not all on the same footing" (1985:259): "As I type, I am also displacing air, raising the noise level in the house, wearing out typewriter ribbons, increasing the custom of our local typing supplies shop, and so on. But what I'm *doing* is writing a paper . . . " Some obvious objections: Why, after all, stop with "writing a paper"? What of seeking fame, or a promotion, or to best an opponent, or to make mother proud, or to avoid facing a troubled domestic life? What of expressing a bourgeois world-view or a male subject position? What of a habitus for which the writing of papers is a naturalized mode of action regardless of individual intentions, like, say, a ritual?

Taylor claims that ordinary language serves as a metalanguage (reflexive language about action) that both defines actions for the actor and makes them available for the interpreting outsider. Its role in defining the boundaries of action explains why interpretation is not unbounded. We need to be specific about what this metalanguage does and does not offer us. Taylor is arguing against the objectivist metalanguages of positivist social science. Therefore the crucial point is to show that actions depend on self-interpretation. In this respect, the outsider's metalanguages of class or gender, unconscious desires, and so forth are not immediately pertinent. The crucial metalanguage is that which guides the actor *herself* with a description of what is going on. But intuitive introspection is not sufficient, for that description must be drawn from a vocabulary of actions shared with others, and it comes into play when one is accounting for one's own actions *to* them. Shared language provides a "public space, or common vantage point" (1985:273; cf. 1987:59–61) that persons can share and *know that they share*. The alternative descriptions I have just offered may count as descriptions *of someone else* but they are not likely to function either in the agent's *own* self-accounting or in her sense of being with others.

A generation later, however, those who take the question of objectivism as settled may ask different questions of this account. First, who owes an account to whom? The existence of a shared moral domain, Taylor's "public," and the conditions that call for an accounting have become unobvious. If accounting to others is interaction, it is likely to occur between people with unequal capacities and claims on one another, their very status as "insiders" to the same community potentially subject to question. Second, the existence of a moral domain does not guarantee shared descriptions of action. The husband who insists on his conjugal rights confronts the wife who fears domestic rape, the joker's "fun"

is the victim's "ethnic slur."[9] Third, as the development of the category "domestic rape" suggests, the contest of interpretations involves a historical dynamic, in which, for example, emergent descriptions will have "looping effects" (Hacking 1994) as they provide actors with new kinds of action. Finally, "culture's" relation to "society" is altered from the sharp distinction maintained by Parsonians if, as Taylor implies, it is not just sharing a culture but *awareness* of sharing it that forms a pragmatic condition for having a community (Urban 2001) or a public (Appadurai 1996) in the first place.

The actions that most concern Taylor are those that require terminology like "shame" and thus "a certain language of mutual action and communication by which we blame, exhort, admire, esteem each other" (1987:43). By acting we make ourselves available to evaluations by others. Hence cultural interpretation is possible because the interpreter, theoretically, has available the very same interpretive possibilities that the insider has (1987:46). They cannot, at least in principle, be radically "other" to one another—at least as long as the interpreter situates herself within the moral sphere defining the actor's "public."

At this point Taylor's account captures some essential strengths and weaknesses of the interpretive turn in its heyday. By showing that the local relevant terms for self-interpretation are necessary conditions for action, he helps fill out the argument for the particular. Local metalanguages demand an epistemology of intimacy. Indeed, they demand more, for it is not just a question of "perspective." For if metalanguages of action mediate people's moral engagement with one another, what of the anthropologist's traditional license to enter and leave communities with ease, exempt from the give and take of claims-making? Certain Native American groups, for instance, have come simply to deny it altogether.

But an epistemology of intimacy, if necessary, is not sufficient. First, to the extent that metalanguages are not merely neutral guides to action but part of the discourse of self-justification, they offer poor purchase for certain kinds of critical insight, help in sorting through the unequal relations among counterclaims, or understanding which of them wins out. And so the lineage I have sketched here has been confronted by—and often grafted to—critical theory, post-colonialism, Marxism, and feminism. Second, intimacy alone does not help us understand in semiotic, pragmatic, or cognitive terms what metalanguages are possible or likely, what forms they may take and how those forms have consequences. Interpretation too often moved directly to "meaning" without, for example, analyzing the how those meanings are objectified and circulate in public. Both of these points suggest that an epistemology of estrangement is crucial.

What does turning text analogues into texts do? As Taylor remarks, once interpretation is internalized, it changes the actor (1987:46–47). Consider Tay-

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[9] These examples come from Anne Norton's commentary on a version of this paper.

lor's example of religious beliefs learned in a colonial missionary school. They are held only by individual subjects, in contrast to the circumstances of "the same" beliefs within the missionary's own society, where, being part of the background domain of "common meanings," they are known by all members of that society to *be* meanings they share (1987:58). They are *still* part of the common meanings of the home society even for atheists who have rejected them (what might today be called "contestation"), in contrast to the mission-ized subject who accepts them, but in the context of a different set of common meanings. The distinction introduces one critical difference between the do-main of actions and the metalanguages that might interpret them. Today's an-thropologists might find it not coincidental that this distinction occurs precise-ly across the non-reciprocal space between colonizer and colonized.

In addition, the beliefs taught in the missionary school are introduced in an explicit form. They are, that is, doctrines to which one could give or withhold one's adherence (Asad 1993). Their epistemic and practical status is quite dis-tinct from, say, Bourdieu's "habitus," Foucault's "discipline," or "iterable" sign forms to which no particular belief can be securely attached (Derrida 1972). To the extent that what Taylor calls common meanings are objectified as cultural metalanguages, they have a distinct status from the domain of unself-conscious practices—the stuff of culture in the Boasian tradition, or of everyday frames for action (Bateson 1955; Goffman 1974). They are forms that exist apart from actors and face them as texts to be read from outside.

Where is one standing when one stands outside that text? To privilege the agent's own description of the action, especially as it is linked to intentionali-ty, commonly presupposes a sovereign self-consciousness, a figure whose in-creasingly spectral character for psychological, psychoanalytic, and political thought I need not rehearse here. But explicit descriptions of action raise other questions as well. As Gilbert Ryle (1946) long ago pointed out, to transform "knowing-how" into the object of "knowing-that" is to change its very na-ture. Because Taylor's main concern is to argue against efforts to determine interpretation-free objects of social science on the model of natural science, he leaves this question largely unexamined. Nor is the distinction merely episte-mological or cognitive (though it is those too, Chaiklin and Lave 1993). Bour-dieu (1972), for instance, argues that "officializing" and "synoptic" discourses manifest a distance from practical activity that only the privileged can enjoy. But, lest we conclude that none but the powerful have access to the self-consciousness afforded by metalanguages, we must allow for a much wider range of modes of self-objectification. These may derive from everything from ritual distantiation (Keane 1995) to the alienation of the oppressed (J. C. Scott 1990).[10] And these are insights the epistemology of intimacy cannot offer by

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[10] *Pace* James Scott, however, metalanguages of oppression are not thereby *privileged* (see Mitchell 1990).

itself. The lack of further inquiry into the character of meta-languages, and their role in the processes of objectification and the transformations of social self-consciousness, has remained a persistent weakness both in the interpretive approach as well as for many of its critics.

What I want to stress here is the centrality of agency to the subject implied by certain features of the interpretive turn. Moreover, Taylor's rejection of positivism implies that positivism necessarily eliminates agency for *both* the object of knowledge *and* the knowing subject, and thus, their capacity to forge, out of the contest among competing interpretations, new, more insightful, meta-languages *together*.

THE CALL FOR MORE PARTICULARITY

In the previous section, I characterized certain themes at the heart of American anthropology's interpretive turn during the 1960s and 1970s. I suggested that a rejection of comparative categories in favor of particularism and an epistemology of intimacy, and an underlying anti-determinism, became part of the taken-for-granted across much of cultural anthropology. But by the end of the next decade, the discipline seemed increasingly riven with hotly contested divisions and sometimes acidic self-critique. There are many reasons for this, including the post-independence transformations of formerly colonial fieldsites, challenges to the Euro-American dominance of representations, the politics of identities, and legitimation crisis in the academy. In theoretical terms, these forces commonly added vigor to post-structuralist challenges to coherent and totalizing models, a revival of more culturally-inflected Marxism and critical theory, and the Foucauldian development of the Nietzschean thesis that the critique of knowledge must go beyond disowning claims to "objectivity" and reveal its inseparability from the power that produces it.

Nonetheless, I suggest that *some* aspects of these critiques were animated by the same general assumptions and values as their targets. Indeed, certain debates could only transpire to the extent that the participants agreed on what was most important (thus their greater impact in anthropology than, say, sociology [see Steinmetz n.d.]). For all their differences, many protagonists in the debates can be understood as competing over whose approach better recognizes human agency and self-determination. To exemplify this I turn to Lila Abu-Lughod's "Writing against Culture" (1991) and Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference" (1992). Although these essays are over a decade old, they remain exemplary of two prominent, if distinct, directions for contemporary internal critiques of anthropology. Both raise important questions about the identity, coherence, and power relations of the "we" that has been tacitly presupposed by anthropological discourse. Both respond to changing status of particularism when ethnographic attention shifts to colonialism and globalization. Both are concerned with the

politics and ethics of representing "otherness" and take as a touchstone Marcus and Clifford's *Writing Culture* (1986), which is both apotheosis and immanent critique of the textualism of the interpretive turn. In their efforts to provide an alternative to "culture," however, they would push the anthropologist to opposed ends of the anthropological dialectic, Abu-Lughod inwards, toward individual subjectivities, Gupta and Ferguson outwards, toward global political-economic forces. And yet, I argue, they remain within the parameters developed in the genealogy I am tracing, sharing the high value it places on agency and a tendency to associate agency with self-interpretation.

Lila Abu-Lughod has been an especially eloquent exponent of anthropology's responsibilities to multiple constituencies. And, certainly since September 2001, her call to humanize the Muslim world for Euro-Americans remains urgent. My concern here is her assertion that the culture concept is inherently a vehicle of unequal power between knower and known because it does violence to the actualities of lived experience. To be sure, her portrayal is a straw man, since few anthropologists have ever seen people as "robots programmed with 'cultural' rules" (1991:158), and traditional fieldwork would be impossible if they really thought there was "a fundamental distinction between self and other" (1991:137). But this is the stuff of polemics, and we might charitably reframe her question: the Boasian geographer can treat Grand Canyon as a unity because it can be taken as a given that the canyon is in "his own" world. But who am "I" and what is "my" world such that "Bedouin culture" is "in" it? The question has become unavoidable (see Appadurai 1986; Asad 1973; Coronil 1996; Dirks 1992; Fabian 1983; Ortner 1995; Said 1978; Trouillot 1991).

There have been two common strategies for responding to the problem by restaging anthropology's claims to an epistemology of intimacy. One is to present oneself as a mere reporter of others' stories. Yet, of course, stories are not transparent—indeed, even simple transcription already implies theoretical choices (Ochs 1979), to say nothing of the pragmatics of interaction (Briggs 1984) and the politics of choosing among the stories that result (Myers 1988). Speaking in a singular or monologic "voice"—and thus, with a singular social identity relative to a clear and distinct project—is the highly marked outcome of political effort rather than a natural or neutral condition (see Bakhtin 1981; Hanks 1996; Hill and Irvine 1992; Irvine 1996; Lee 1997; Vološinov 1930).

The second strategy is to claim some identity with the people being represented. But on what grounds? For clearly there are innumerable dimensions along which pre-existing identification can be asserted, denied, or confused (Alcoff 1991; Bhabha 1994; Butler 1997; Caton 1999), and the resulting reification itself can be dangerous (Said 1993). Indeed, it is not only outsiders who betray intimacies (Herzfeld 1997). Moreover, as Susan Harding (1991) has observed, strategies that link insight directly to political identification with those one studies also fare poorly in the case of "the repugnant other," in her case, the

radical Christian right, with whom one does not sympathize. How one defines the communities within which one has moral commitments cannot be given entirely in advance.

If, as I have suggested, the models of culture that were dominant by the 1970s were motivated in part by the effort to demonstrate a locus of autonomy for human enterprises, they share with Abu-Lughod's "humanism" an underlying anti-determinism. To be sure, they seek that autonomy at very distinct planes. For the former, self-determination is collective, for the latter, individual. But both take as their starting place an ethical commitment to an object of study that is not reduced to external determinants, and both seek its confirmation in people's self-interpretations, linked to an ideology of the particular.

Consider Abu-Lughod's proposal that anthropologists write " 'ethnographies of the particular' as instruments of tactical humanism," stressing specificity and internal complexity over generality and simplicity (1991:145). Only by viewing individuals, she asserts, can one restore to people their actuality as doers. We must shift away from the metalanguages that they share with one another, which Taylor sees as the very condition for the possibility of agency. Rather, Abu-Lughod seems to imply that what is shared with others functions only as a constraint. Throughout, her focus is on conscious experience, taken as a foundation for intimate knowledge.

There is a paradox here. It arises, in part, from conflating the metalanguages that mediate actions and those an outsider to the action might construct about them. By trying to reject the latter, Abu-Lughod ends up treating the former as transparent—and, in effect, she silently smuggles in her own metalanguages to replace them. Consider her interest in how people go "through their life agonizing over decisions, making mistakes, trying to make ourselves look good, enduring tragedies and personal losses, enjoying others, and finding moments of happiness" (1991:158). Can we understand why people can anticipate and make sense of what happens now, what happened before, what might happen, what could never happen, what had better not happen simply by appealing to "how life is lived"? Yet even such apparently natural and intuitively obvious concepts are not immediately present to the senses but depend on some mode of self-interpretation, and thus some potential for self-objectification.

Abu-Lughod's specific example of what a humanistic ethnography of the particular would consist of (1991:154–56) requires both author and reader to accept as transparent certain categories such as piety, immorality, the unthinkable, nostalgia, honor, reputation, authority, and prayer. This is what lends her humanism its sense of intimacy and familiarity. For this view of humanism assumes there is nothing problematic about ordinary language, as if we had full mastery of it and as if it did not bring all sorts of things into our lives including both tacit values and modes of self-deception and domination. To point this out, I think, does not mean that "others" are not like "us." Rather, the point is that even "we" (whoever that problematic category might be) are not fully trans-

parent to ourselves. By favoring the epistemology of intimacy, Abu-Lughod pushes anthropology toward the concreteness of fieldwork and virtually eliminates, or renders covert, the analytical distance that follows it. Note the irony: whereas the "individual" in a Boasian life history is supposed to be "typical" of a status, role, or community, Abu-Lughod's "particulars" offer us individuals who, in the final instance, seem to be typical at the *greatest* level of social generality altogether, of "humanity" writ large.

THE CALL FOR GREATER SCOPE

Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992), although oriented by similar political concerns about power and identity, exemplify the important—indeed, many would argue, crucial—effort to push anthropology in the opposite direction, broadening in spatial and temporal terms what counts as the relevant context. Abu-Lughod dispenses with the question of "larger forces" by asserting that "because these 'forces' are only embodied in the actions of individuals living in time and place, ethnographies of the particular capture them best" (1992: 156). In contrast, Gupta and Ferguson follow the lead of earlier writers such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1961) and Bernard Cohn (1980), who argued for greater historical awareness in anthropology on the grounds that too close a focus—a perspective restricted only to what one can see in fieldwork—tends to *conceal* the workings of such larger forces.

Because it is easy to read Gupta and Ferguson as part of a turn to political economy, I want to draw attention to the other term in their discussion. "Culture" plays several conflicting roles in their writing. First, it refers to discrete public categories of identity. For example, they quote a man from Birmingham, England, discussing the mix of ethnicities in his neighborhood (1992:38, from Hebdige 1979). As their use of the tag "young white reggae fan" suggests (his own description being "I'm just a broad person"), this man's identity lies in his own hands, an active mode of self-construction. It is largely a matter of allegiances, manifested in choices among co-existing options for expression and consumption. Although this view of culture shares a great deal with the externally imposed reifications Abu-Lughod criticizes, here, by contrast, it implies conscious self-possession, in contrast to the unconscious habits of Boasian culture.[11]

But as a bounded whole, culture *denies* self-creation, involving "supposedly natural connections between peoples and places" (1992:39; see Appadurai 1988; 1989). Yet this naturalization in turn stands opposed to "cultural construction" (1992:36), a mode of self-creation which it suppresses. The latter includes "conceptual processes of place making" by which "space is made mean-

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[11] Thus, when Appadurai asserts that culture in the contemporary world has ceased to be a matter of habitus but has become "an arena for conscious choice, justification, and representation" (1996:44), he is emphasizing the liberatory potential of self-awareness. As such, culture can also be property with all the political struggle that entails (Kirsch 2001).

ingful" (1992:39–40). As they note, this emphasis on imagination and mean-ing has been well established within anthropology since Durkheim and Mauss (1903), and their use of the modifier "cultural" seems to point to how humans impose meaning on an otherwise meaningless world. It poses, and valorizes, what humans create, over against mere givens, non-human determinants. One might recall here Boas' geographer, for whom the unity of "Grand Canyon" ex-ists not in nature but by virtue of his relationship to it.

Where Gupta and Ferguson see themselves differing from earlier anthropol-ogists is in asking "Who has the power to make places of spaces? Who contests this?" Now, one might ask *cui bono* even of agentless structures. But Gupta and Ferguson seek an agent. At this point, they face a dilemma. For they seem to reproduce an earlier dichotomy between the meaningful and material, locating agency in the former, but subjecting it to power derived from "political-economic determinations that have a logic of their own" (1992:40). To analyze power therefore ultimately requires one to turn away from self-interpretation and toward the entities, forces, and causalities captured by an observer's inde-pendent categories of analysis.

If Abu-Lughod pushes anthropology toward particularities at the expense of any capacity to make a comparative claim, Gupta and Ferguson seem, at mo-ments, on the verge of heading in the opposite direction, toward a general po-litical economy whose workings transcend particulars—not just physical lo-calities—to provide an ultimate foundation for explanation. At the far end of that trajectory, perhaps, the concept of power threatens to become less a way of identifying the effects of actions and circumstances than of postulating their au-tonomous cause. And now we might find ourselves back at Abu-Lughod's side to ask: can this perspective give an account not only of "who contests" but to what ends, in light of what values and desires, and guided by what imaginable possibilities or presumed constraints? To the extent that such an approach pre-supposes an opposition between "cultural" processes and "political-economic de-terminations," it is in danger of reproducing the separation of meaning and val-ues from causality and action, granting, perhaps, too much to *both* sides of the opposition. At that point, the relative "freedom" of self-interpretation becomes a function of its distance from "power."[12]

THE "SELF" AND THE "INTERPRETATION" IN SELF-INTERPRETATION

My discussion of Taylor above should suggest, first, that to understand even "personal experience" requires a capacity to shift between epistemologies of intimacy and of estrangement. Second, this very capacity for shifting is *already* inherent to experience, action, and self-understanding. But does not estrange-ment lead to betrayal or reification, as Abu-Lughod claims? I want to suggest

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[12] Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) critique of the dualisms of ideal/material and freedom/determi-nation this entails is be especially germane here, coming as it does from within the Marxist tradi-tion.

that, real as these dangers are, they do not inhere in either objectification or metalanguages *per se*. And clarifying the distinctions among kinds of objectification and their roles in social action may help us reconfigure what a kinds of knowledge the human sciences might claim. To ask "what are you doing?" seeks your language of self-description. To answer it requires both close understanding and its externalization. But the question, *even if asked of oneself*, sees actions as a problem in search of a response, a stance that opens out toward estrangement, and the possibility of reformulation, of new answers. This becomes apparent when the question provokes reflection on what is otherwise tacit. As E. Valentine Daniel (1996) puts it, anthropological dialogue is like the disruption of habit that can produce objectification. And, one might add, no one ever lives by unreflecting habit alone.

Disruption and objectification are already innate possibilities, since metalanguages of action are not simply for "me," private and conceptual—they are for "you." They are thus subject to objectification and circulation in semiotic form. As semiotic forms, they circulate publicly and are realized materially. Metalanguages are therefore not simply more or less arbitrary interpretations of a world. Rather, they are *causally* linked to material processes along several dimensions, and in multiple directions. As Charles Sanders Peirce (1955) argued, semiotic forms are not arbitrary (in the Saussurean sense), and do not merely exist in a separate, disembodied world of ideas. If, for example, they purport to resemble their object, they depend on the specific qualities of things. If they are indexical, such as knowledge, skills, habits, distinctive possessions, class and regional accents, they are subject to scarcity and causality, and thus exist in dynamic articulation with political economy and social institutions (see Bourdieu 1979). This should figure into any analysis of power's authority, without collapsing authority into power (see Keane 1997).

And conversely, objectifications are subject to recontextualization embedded in actions. In contrast to the romantic critique of objectification as, say, inherently alienating or a violation of self-presence (see Miller 1987), whether objectification is negative or not is a function of who I am for you and what epistemic status I accord that moment of objectification. Actions and tacit knowledge, for instance, are neither encompassed by, nor ultimate foundations for, explicit self-interpretation or even further metalanguages, since all enter into ongoing transformations of one another. This is one reason why it is a mistake to align "meaning" with the conceptual in a domain of freedom, over against materiality in a domain of determinism. Objectification puts actions and actors at risk by giving them semiotic (thus public) form and changing their epistemic and pragmatic status (see Keane 1995, 1997). But, far from being only a disease of social science, this is the very politics of everyday awareness and interaction.[13]

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[13] Some of the crucial arguments compressed here go back to Vološinov (1930) on reflexive speech as a mode of social evaluation, Goffman (1981) on the shifting alignments toward one's own words that characterize everyday interaction, and Schutz (1932) on the processes of typifica-

"Local" metalanguages, however, cannot in themselves provide a sufficient account of action. Even as guides to "self-understanding," they cannot simply replace tacit know-how or intuitions of value.[14] They must be understood for what they are, potentially explicit objectifications that mediate but do not fully ground the actions within which they are situated. Narrative, for instance, has long been posed as an alternative to totalizing and distancing formulations. But narratives are not simply waiting for listeners to come along, they are crystallized contextual moments of explicitness, discursive actions that turn other actions—other contexts—into texts recognizable within genres (Bakhtin 1986).[15] Contrary to Abu-Lughod's assumption, "ordinary" discourses and "distancing" discourses (1991:158) do not exist in isolation from one another. As Bakhtin pointed out, the languages of officials, "experts," journalists, and so forth saturate so-called everyday speech with varying degrees and kinds of authority.[16] And local metalanguages are not exhaustive—they neither can nor aim to specify everything socially or conceptually relevant about an action or its context, but only those that are selected by the publicly available terms for the self-awareness of actors.

These remarks about meta-languages of action constrain and contextualize (but do not eliminate) the importance that interpretive and symbolic anthropology accorded "the actors' own" categories. It should become apparent that the capacity to reflect on, criticize, and, especially, show the links among local meta-languages depends on the availability of some further meta-level. To understand the non-explicit features of action, the habitual or the covert, requires an epistemology of intimacy—but to take them as anything other than obvious, natural, self-contained, and unshakeable requires an epistemology of estrangement. This further level need not derive from something "external" to a community, since it builds on pervasive capacities for self-reflection, inherent to the semiotic mediation of action.

It is when we imagine that agency is naturally located within pre-existing

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tion. Important recent work on metalanguages includes Hanks 1996, Lee 1997, Lucy 1993, and Silverstein and Urban 1996. See also the useful review in Ahearn 2001.

[14] The most prominent sociological account of tacit know-how is, of course, Bourdieu's "habitus," but the basic notion is crucial to both Boasian and Durkheimian approaches to social action and culture (Sapir 1927; Mauss 1935). For the historical specificity and politics of "instincts" such as contempt, see Herzog 1998.

[15] For good examples of how to rethink the historicity of narratives, see Amin 1995, Chakrabarty 2000, Stoler and Strassler 2000, and Steedly 1993. For the general processes of decontextualization and recontextualization of discourse, see Silverstein and Urban 1996, and Tedlock and Mannheim 1995; for the politics of entextualization see Shryock 1997.

[16] See, for instance, Rofel 1999 on the impact of official discourses on Chinese workers' subjectivities, Harding 2000 on the Bible's role in the self-consciousness of American fundamentalists, Donham 1999 on transnational narratives in the Ethiopian revolution, Tsing 1993 on parodistic appropriations of state discourses in Indonesia, and Riles 2000 on the transnational circulation of documents. For a close analysis of the struggle between more and less "external" discourses within a single monologue, see Hill 1995. Abu-Lughod herself has written sensitively about the impact of elite discourses on village television viewers (1999).

individuals, rather than, say, forged among them, that other formations such as families, institutions, societies, and so forth seem most determinist. This parochial perspective is not only theoretically problematic, it is ill-equipped to deal empirically with people who would deny that they themselves are or would want to be humanist or liberal subjects (Keane 1996; 1998; 2002; Mahmood 2001; Miyazaki 2000), even in "the West" insofar as it contains such powerful alternatives as, say, technoscience (Rabinow 1996) and Christian fundamentalism (Crapanzano 2000; Harding 2000). Indeed, the critique of anthropology should not stop at its understanding of so-called "others," but should help show how, in any given instance, even "we" (however defined) are not who we think we are. It should insist on sustaining the project of anthropology as an epistemological critique of received categories, of their givens, and accept that this project involves the anthropologist in commonplace strategies of (partial and situated) estrangement and self-estrangement, objectification and self-objectification. If this observation is not entirely new, it does seem to demand re-legitimation.

AN ETHIC AND ITS OBJECTS

I have suggested that certain core themes in the Boasian vision of "geography" run through a wide range of subsequent and sometimes antagonistic visions of human science. The impulse toward comparison and theorization has always encountered a deep countervailing insistence on ethnographic particularity, its most sweeping claims always threatened by the pointed exception. At either end of anthropology's historical vagrancies, Boas' geographer joins forces with post-modernism in insisting on the historical situatedness and moral commitments that bind the observer and the observed. I want to close, however, by re-asserting the other side of that dialectic, anthropology's engagement with the ambitions of social theory.

The privileging of the particular has come to be intertwined with the concept of self-interpretation. This is not an inherent or necessary relationship but a genealogical one. It is at least conceivable that the terms for self-interpretation will turn out to have universal underpinnings, that the categories of actions and actors are, underneath it all, natural kinds. Or that they are ultimately produced by "external" powers, or remain irreducibly contingent. But the genealogy delineated here has led elsewhere. The insistence that cultural things make comparative metalanguages suspect has become for many anthropologists mere common sense. But the results can verge on the incommunicable. And this can invite, by way of reaction, the return of a potentially imperial common sense— the notion, for instance, that "globalization" means that observers need no longer doubt their categories.

What has given these intertwined themes their persistence, their urgency, and perhaps even their sense of obviousness, I suggest, is in part the underlying ethic of demonstrating some locus of human self-creation not reducible to exter-

nal determinations. To be sure, few would eliminate determinations altogether—debates over structure and agency, the historical turn, and so forth being efforts to reconcile this project with a sober appreciation of power effects. But the epistemic and even ethical project seems recurrently to circle back to the particularity and treacherously obvious grounds of experience (J. W. Scott 1991). These grounds are where people interact with one another, where decisions are—or seem to be—made, actors identified, responsibilities allocated, actions justified, moral claims asserted, and possible futures imagined. Where the contending versions of anthropology that I have sketched differ is in situating the locus of self-creation and of that which lies "outside" it. It is perhaps the implicit values underwriting their shared interest in agency that will later, after this set of factions has been reconfigured, seem most distinctive about the study of culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

But more than its parochialism should make us question this ethic. Seeking to overcome determinism, it tends toward an equally problematic notion of freedom. Pitted against a hypostasized notion of science, it risks reifying humanism's subject. Identifying freedom with the domain of ideas, it risks opposing them to a domain of material determinants. And when linked to the epistemology of intimacy, it can encourage disingenuous claims to be eschewing analytic categories. In short, this ethic is in perpetual danger of reproducing the original terms of the opposition.

To this there seem to be three broad avenues of response. First, the anthropologist might decide openly to claim the project of demonstrating human self-determination, even if that means, say, to insist on the local genealogy of liberalism as part of her inescapable positionality, or in the name of an overriding set of moral and political commitments—to make its normativity explicit (Anderson 2000). But to do so requires (at least) a certain disciplinary modesty in the face of potentially irreconcilable ethical stances and reality claims.

Second, the anthropologist might reject the terms of the anti-deterministic project. And indeed, alongside the genealogy traced out here, there has always been a parallel effort to seek some ultimate determination that will finally settle matters, with, perhaps, a wearied sigh of relief. We can see this today in the growing popularity in many fields of evolutionary and genetic models that would explain human behavior. It may be that a revived economism will produce a similar return to foundations. Nor would it be adequate simply to counter them by saying that they deny human agency. After all, they could reply that the prevailing visions of agency are psychological or ideological illusions, that we must face up to how things actually are. But even this response cannot tell us why *these* are their objects, why their explanations *matter*, and *for whom*.

But there is a third possibility, that of keeping in sight the problematic ground of the ethnographic particular neither as a privileged foundation for knowledge nor as a locus of self-determination. Rather, this ground characterizes the space

of encounter in which people seek or deny one another's recognition. The dialectic between estrangement and intimacy continually passes through—but should not simply rest at—these encounters. On the one hand, our analyses must take us away from them, and demand some portable objectifications. On the other hand, to the extent that our most distinctive questions begin with the fact that both we and our interlocutors act, think, hope, remember, foresee, and form judgments amidst a world of other people, our engagements should return us to them again. This, at least, would acknowledge that the instigation for social knowledge arises from within sociality.

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