Understanding and Interpretation in Historical Ethnology

RENÉ R. GADACZ
University of Alberta

RÉSUMÉ

Les écrits ethnohistoriques ont souvent adopté une position neutre entre l'histoire elle-même et l'ethnologie historique en n'utilisant pas la théorie ethnographique pour la reconstruction ethnographique. Ceci s'explique par le fait que les écrits suivent ce que cet essai considère comme de fausses hypothèses, à savoir (a) que l'histoire ethnologique devrait s'intéresser à la dynamique des groupes, (b) que l'on doit considérer les motivations de ces groupes, (c) et que ces motivations peuvent être comprises objectivement. Ces hypothèses produisent des contradictions méthodologiques qui entravent le développement de l'ethnologie historique. Un argument est avancé pour que l'on abandonne l'objectivité ou au moins cette attitude neutre. Les préjugés et la subjectivité en recherche sont admis comme quelque chose d'inévitable et peuvent être appréhendés par une attitude auto-critique.

This paper concerns itself with a particular methodological approach to historical ethnology. Reference here is especially to notions of "understanding", "objectivity", and "motives" in historiography. These terms are closely related to discussions in philosophy and epistemology; the aim of this paper is to discover

---

Acknowledgements: A previous version of this paper was presented at the 8th Congress of the Canadian Ethnology Society, Ottawa 1981. I wish to express my gratitude to Dr. Charles Bishop (SUNY-Oswego) for commenting on this paper and for providing criticism and encouragement.

what bearing they may have upon ethnohistorical methodology. These concepts guided Trigger (1976) in the writing of over nine hundred pages of Huron specific history, and "objectivity" in particular was defended in a previous paper (Trigger 1975). In discussing these concepts (or precepts, to be more accurate) it is maintained that the following are false assumptions: (a) that to investigate the relations that exist between groups, we must consider motives, and (b) that motives can be understood objectively. Finally, in arguing against these assumptions, the position of ethnology in historical reconstruction is reaffirmed.

I

Presumably, all social scientists are concerned with observer bias and the effects such may have upon scientific conclusions. Ethnohistory in this regard is no exception. De Laguna (1960) as well as Washburn (1961) acknowledged explicitly that interpretation of history requires the preception and the reconciliation of biases and prejudices. The method and ideal of ethnohistory, according to Washburn (1961: 41), can be furthermore attained when the values and history of both groups, Native and white European, are fully understood, and, according to De Laguna (1960: 41), when the motives of human beings are also understood. Application of "the best theories" to an "understanding of motives" is thus considered the key to achieving desired objectivity.

It is not unlikely that these views have been shared by other practitioners of historical ethnology even earlier than 1960. More recently, Trigger declared at one point in his writing that the precise objectives of ethnohistory are still uncertain. So uncertain are they, I believe, that not all writers have been concerned with *how* they conduct their research or with what intellectual baggage they embark on the journey through the historical sources. Trigger, however, is explicit in his methodological orientation:

> ...it [is] especially important that current ethnohistorical writing should aim to make the behavior of Indian groups logical and understandable. Moreover, and this many anthropologists tend to forget, if we are to understand the total situation, we must attempt to achieve a similar dispassionate understanding of the motives of European groups... who interacted with the Indians (1975: 55).

Trigger is interested in achieving parity in his treatment of both groups. He is strictly concerned with the relationship between these

groups, and he emphasizes that he is not concerned with the inner dynamics of the groups themselves (Trigger 1975: 55). Trigger has reiterated essentially what Washburn stated in 1961, when he stated that "the desirability of focusing on this relationship rather than on the history or ethnology of the individual peoples would seem to have special relevance" (Washburn 1961: 42).

II

If there is a common thread to the statements quoted above (and there are many more) it is that all of these authors are keen to minimize bias in their ethnohistorical writing. Yet in doing so they sit on the fence between specific history and historical ethnology, that is, between culture history and ethnographic reconstruction. This apparently neutral posture has been held to the detriment of ethnographic and anthropological analysis and has led to serious contradictions between the goals of the methodology and the aims of ethnohistory. Even Trigger recognized that "only the anthropologist's understanding of Indian life can provide the background needed to assess and understand the behaviour of the Indians as it is recorded in historical records" (1976: 13). Is not the anthropologist's understanding of Indian life informed by his knowledge of the inner dynamics of Indian groups? And does this not in turn inform his understanding of their behavior? As Carmack (1972: 229) rightly pointed out, "by turning to the relationship between the dominant and subordinate cultures of colonial societies, both American and British anthropologists were forced to study cultural dynamics, 'the mechanisms that had brought about the observed results in the institutions and beliefs of peoples who had been in contact'".

To assess the results of change and to focus upon the relationship between groups surely presupposes ethnographic knowledge and requires a combined historical and functionalist approach (Gadacz 1979). Indeed, to make the behavior of Indian or white groups logical and understandable requires detailed and informed knowledge of "the standards governing life in the society in [which the groups we are considering] live" (Winch 1958: 83). To learn what are the accepted standards of reasonable behavior in a given society constitutes nothing less than ethnography and true to the phenomenological rule of thumb, it establishes the basis for an understanding before an explanation emerges. In other words,

explanation presupposes understanding. To fully achieve an "understanding of motives", then, causal explanations in the scientific sense are sought – relationships between conscious events and actions to which they give rise are thus said to constitute "motives" (Winch 1958: 78). Motive explanations, therefore, are causal explanations.

A serious difficulty which motive explanations is that "the motive ascribed to a sequence of behavior is simply a synonym for that behavior itself", in other words, this sort of explanation may render tautologies (Winch 1958: 76, 78). If this is true, learning what motives are does not lead to understanding at all. Indeed, motives cannot be said to suffice for a *logical* knowledge of the relationship between events and actions themselves *(ibid)*. For those who endorse the understanding of motives as part of the goals of ethnohistory, the implications are particularly critical. Consider the information base with which ethnohistorians must deal. The data are finite; events and actions are "fixed". We can neither change them nor their context. Clearly, we risk tautology when we attempt explanation. Our understanding of the relationship or connection between the events and actions is constrained and therefore depends to a significant degree upon the wisdom with which we interpret them. Our explanation of events and actions must, as stated before, be informed by our ethnographic knowledge.

III

Writers who espouse the idea that motives can be understood face two contradictions. One is that motives are synonymous with the actions they purport to describe – motives go no further than to reiterate what has already occured. Certainly, that is not what explanation means. The second contradiction that this methodological orientation faces is that (even if motive explanations *were* valid) the establishment of a causal explanation *cannot* be objective. One may attempt to formulate objective explanations, but one cannot formulate them objectively. The subtle difference here has important methodological implications. Explanations are always informed by interpretations, and interpretations are always subjective. How, then, can interpretations and explanations avoid ethnographic knowledge? To formulate a truly "objective" explanation much anthropological knowledge and background is

required, yet it is precisely this knowledge that is ignored when the relationship between groups is stressed, as opposed to the inner dynamics of these groups. Likewise, examining the relationship between Europeans and Indians does not constitute increased objectivity. We have merely expanded the circle to encompass still more events and actions, but we are no closer to either a better understanding or an explanation. It is suggested therefore that the inner dynamics of the groups themselves, and not merely the relationship between them, *contra* Trigger, are important to consider. In disagreement with Washburn, the history and ethnology of the individual peoples must receive primary attention, or else interactions, relationships, motives (if these are what one is after) and so on, are also meaningless. Interaction between groups and relationships ensuing from these interactions are *givens* – they are part of an immutable historical record and it is the goal of historical ethnology to interpret them. Thus, interactions and relationships must be approached subjectively, even ethnocentrically. Of course, both subjectivity and objectivity are dangerous precepts: subjectivity may tend towards blatant ethnocentrism, and objectivity can be reductionist and instrumental, even unintentionally.

Trigger employs Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* as part of his methodology. This "technique of the theatre" is said to create a distance between the observer and the observed and results in detached, objective observation (Trigger 1975). It is not an altogether satisfactory device: Peter Winch has remarked that "what is dangerous is that the user of devices such as these should come to think of *his* way of looking at things as somehow more real than the usual way" (Winch 1958: 118). Scholte (1978: 182) likewise declares, *contra* Trigger's appreciation of Brecht's device, that "the act of detached observation [or description]... effectively dehumaniz[es] the observed [and described] and reduces him to an inferior position". Winch (1958: 118), with specific reference to Brecht, calls his technique a "God-like attitude". From these criticisms it is clear that there is an important difference between an objective description or observation, and a description that is said to be done objectively.

IV

It is ironic that the search for value-freedom, neutrality, scientific objectivity, and even cultural relativism all turn out to be

nothing less than synonyms for a peculiar ethnocentric conception of rationality – *our* rationality. Habermas (*op. cited* in Scholte 1978: 183) suggested these terms are symptoms, not solutions, of what is wrong with our rationality. Diamond (*op. cited* in Scholte 1978: 188, n. 79) went even further and declared that "relativism is the bad faith of the conqueror, who has become secure enough to become a tourist". This is not the time to elaborate on criticisms of objectivity but it is noteworthy to mention that social theory – and this includes anthropology – is also guided by instrumental notions of reason and that cultural relativism is merely an aspect of this same instrumental rationality. This is because we have come to model social life after experimental physics (Scholte 1978: Radcliffe-Brown 1952). Yet we have also come to realize that to operate within such a *scientistic* context is an epistemological error (Giddens 1977: 138; Agar 1980: 255). Dilthey (Watson-Franke and Watson 1975: 248) reminded us that in the natural sciences and in the humanities, objectivity has different premises entirely. Consequently, the use of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* is unwarranted because it is too closely allied with instrumentalism. Objectivity of this sort is unacceptable.

In pursuing explanations that are founded upon subjectivity the researcher must pay particular attention to "the risks of taking a partisan position and of the unintended consequences" (Scholte 1978: 185). Nevertheless, "these risks... are... preferable to the rigor mortus and 'hygienically perfected alienation' of scientism" *(ibid).* Agar expressed it very well:

> Rather than trying to eliminate 'observer effects', for example, one focuses on the interpreter as participant in a tradition which guides and is changed by the process of understanding another. Rather than striving for 'objective knowledge', one accepts the fact that knowledge is situated in an historical moment (Agar 1980: 255).

Indeed, "there must be a frank recognition that our primary means to understanding another culture is through the stock of categories, beliefs, and values we acquire as members of our own culture" (Hudson 1973: 135). This is not to suggest that this point of view is negative or that it posits a return to ethnocentrism in its denegrading form – far from it: "From the point of view of hermeneutics, it is the *bridge* between two cultures" (Watson-Franke and Watson 1975: 253). Lévi-Strauss also argued that "rather than forgetting his own specific form of life, the ethnographer (or the

historian for that matter) must believe that his own culture is an asset, rather than a liability" (Bauman 1978: 220); Lévi-Strauss tells us that our culture serves as a datum point, as a kind of yardstick against which we project and measure the facts and features which we have found in history or ethnography. One form of culture only makes sense when compared with others. Trigger is correct in asserting that it will require effort and self-discipline to understand the actions of European groups (Trigger 1975: 55), but this does not mean that ethnohistorians must embrace objectivity in order to accomplish this. Certainly, the kind of objectivity which Trigger and others wish to gain is much more difficult to deal with than merely to acknowledge and account for observer bias by way of *caveat*. Bias is probably preferable to dehumanization.

V

To achieve an even greater and deeper understanding beyond just realizing the value of our own positions in time and space, we need as well to be equally aware that self-reflection and "critical reason [also] embraces a theory's origin and 'the context in which knowledge is produced and used'" (Scholte 1978: 184). This is the *caveat* to which reference was made above. Sturtevant (1966: 18, 21) realized – as have many generations of historians before him – that "as ethnological theory developes, the reanalysis of earlier ethnographic sources will increase". If explanation presupposes understanding, then it is plain that our interpretations are informed by our theories. The soundness of our understanding and the quality of our explanations are thus closely tied to the development of theoretical thinking – in anthropology, ethnology, ethnography, as well as in history. Theory in historical ethnology is interdisciplinary; how can it be objective or be put to objective use?

In conclusion, neither "detached and critical commentary" nor a strict concern with relationships between groups as opposed to their inner dynamics, will contribute to a better understanding of "the total situation". On the contrary, such a perspective may do more harm than good. That some ethnohistorians have adopted such a perspective may be explained by the fact that "for all the sophisticated mechanical models that we have developed to describe, explain, and interpret 'culture', none prepares us to discover or

understand 'the meaning of a phenomenon in a foreign context against our own background'" (Watson-Franke and Watson 1975: 255, 257). In adopting such an "objective" orientation, it is as if it is our background we want to escape from. Such an orientation seems to leave little room for the critical application of anthropological theory and neither presupposes nor utilizes historical ethnography. Understanding motives involves ethnographic reconstruction first; only then are we prepared to go beyond, to "explain" group behavior or group inter- and intra-action. Historical ethnology is the testing-ground for anthropological theory, and an historical ethnography cannot be conducted any more objectively than when an ethnographer conducts his research as a participant-observer. Bias is intrinsic to both modes of research.

REFERENCES

AGAR, M.
1980 "Hermeneutics in Anthropology", *Ethos* 8(3): 253-272.

BAUMAN, Z.
1978 *Hermeneutics and Social Science.* Hutchinson: London.

CARMACK, R. M.
1972 "Ethnohistory: A Review of its Development, Definitions, Methods, and Aims", *Annual Review of Anthropology* (1972): 227-246.

DE LAGUNA, F.
1960 *The Story of a Tlingit Community.* Bureau of American Ethnology: Washington.

GADACZ, R. R.
1979 "Acculturation as Paradigm in Historical Ethnology: The Montagnais Example", *Ethnohistory* 26 (3): 265-275.

GIDDENS, A.
1977 *Studies in Social and Political Theory.* Basic Books: New York.

HUDSON, C.
1973 "The Historical Approach in Anthropology", in *Handbook of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, edited by J. J. Honigmann. Rand McNally: Chicago, pps. 111-141.

RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. R.
1952 *Structure and Function in Primitive Society.* Free Press: New York.

STURTEVANT, W. C.
1966 "Anthropology, History, and Ethnohistory", *Ethnohistory* 13 (1): 1-51.

SCHOLTE, B.
1978 "On the Ethnocentricity of Scientistic Logic", *Dialectical Anthropology* 3: 177-189.

TRIGGER, B. G.
1975 "Brecht and Ethnohistory", *Ethnohistory* 22(1): 51-56.

1976 *The Children of Aataentsic.* Volumes I and II. McGill-Queen's Printer: Montreal.

WASHBURN, W.
1961 "Ethnohistory: History in the Round", *Ethnohistory* 8(1): 31-48.

WATSON-FRANKE, M. and L. WATSON
1975 "Understanding in Anthropology: A Philosophical Reminder", *Current Anthropology* 16(2): 247-262.

WINCH, P.
1958 *The Idea of a Social Science.* Routledge and Kegan Paul: London.