

Postmodernism's Brief Moment in History

Stanley R. Barrett *University of Guelph*

Postmodernism was not the first perspective to attack the positivistic ambitions (or pretenses) of anthropology, or to take direct aim at the discipline's twin pillars: culture and fieldwork. Yet the postmodernists marched into battle with an array of weapons that had never before been assembled together with such devastating impact. Prominent among these were various faces of power—authority, discourse, resistance and representation—subsumed within a textual analysis derived from literary theory and joined by a call for experimental writing and a rejuvenated relativism, all of which were meant to rescue “the Other” from the rapacious designs of ethnographers, and to serve notice that the metanarratives of the West, especially science, were on the wane.

Like many of my colleagues, I was initially skeptical of the relevancy of a perspective that had its roots in literary criticism. That all changed when I sat down and read *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). It addressed ethical issues in the discipline that for a long time had bothered me, not least of all the lingering colonial-like disparity between the power and authority of the ethnographer and “the native,” as well as the two-faced character of fieldwork: building friendships for instrumental reasons, namely data collection and potential fame.

Certainly the blitzkrieg that was postmodernism overwhelmed mainstream anthropology almost overnight, winning converts and intimidating resisters. Yet a quarter of a century after the publication of *Writing Culture*, the revolution launched by what used to be known as the English Department has run its course, with only the odd combatant left to remind us what the battle was all about. Such has been the short-lived impact of postmodernism that if mainstream anthropology does not come to its rescue and attempt to salvage those aspects of its program that deserve to endure, it may fade from the scene with hardly a trace.

Promises, Promises

Let us examine how the major tenets of postmodernism have stood up to the test of time, beginning with authority. For much of their history, anthropologists assumed that they had both a capacity and a mandate to represent the lives of people in other cultures, who presumably were incapable of speaking for themselves. The anthropologist's authority, as Clifford insightfully revealed, is reinforced by a stylistic device intrinsic to ethnography. First, there is a personal, subjective account which establishes

to the reader that the heroic scholar was actually in the field, face-to-face with “the natives.” Then the brief personal remarks give way to the supposedly objective presentation of data and analysis, a scientific account unblemished by personality or idiosyncratic experience.

Challenges to the ethnographer's authority came from two directions. In a world that was increasingly literate, “the natives” began to talk back. At the same time the postmodernists argued that ethnographies actually have multiple authors: the field worker and the people under investigation whose voices are suppressed. Out of this analysis emerged a plea for dialogic texts or plural authorship in which “the natives” and the researcher become equal partners in the production of knowledge.

Had the practice of joint authorship caught on, a large chunk of the ethical dilemma that bedevils the discipline would have fallen by the wayside, but that was not to be. For all the talk about dialogue and multiple voices, the ethnographer remained firmly in control, determining the tone, content and organization of her or his monograph. Even Clifford's own texts, Rabinow pointed out (1986), are not dialogical. The verdict that the goal of plural authorship has not been realized becomes less surprising when we remember that Clifford himself (1983: 140) fully recognized that the author remains in the “executive, editorial position,” and alluded to dialogic texts as an unattainable utopia.

Following the contributions of Foucault and Said on discourse and representation, postmodernists brought to our attention the political nature of language, deconstructed essences such as culture in order to expose the underlying power relations, and alerted us to the vested interests intrinsic to the practice of representation. There has, however, been a backlash against textual analysis associated with discourse. The argument has not been that discourse analysis is irrelevant. Instead, the contention is, first, that it counts for less than the sheer empirical reality of political relations, and second, that such political relations exist independent of the manner in which they are represented in texts. As Gupta and Ferguson (1992:17) have stated, “there is thus a politics of otherness that is not reducible to a politics of representation.” In other words, discourse analysis only has a limited capacity to illuminate power relations and inequality. Once again, Clifford would not disagree. In his preface to *Writing Culture*, he candidly stated that a textual analysis can only partly explain institutionalized inequality on a global scale.

Resistance is an altogether familiar concept in anthropology, prominent, for example, in *African Political Systems* (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940), but writers such

as Foucault (1980) and Scott (1985) turned it into a sexy topic. Resistance provides us with an opportunity to side with the underdog and celebrate the capacity to fight back. However, a sober second look has dampened our early enthusiasm. One argument is that the emphasis on resistance is tantamount to recognizing that large-scale rebellion and revolution are luxuries of the past. All that remains is resistance and its impact on power relations is minimal. Ortner (1995) put her finger on another weak spot: resistance has been romanticized. It has been interpreted as testimony to the human craving for dignity and freedom, evidence that the human spirit is indomitable. Abu-Lughod (1990), no fan of postmodernism despite her leading role in promoting power at the expense of culture, incorporated both criticisms: resistance is a romanticized form of small-scale subversions, the subject of interest because large-scale collective resurrections have become increasingly improbable. Yet just as we are about to nod our heads in agreement regarding the limited role of resistance, we are reminded that social change has a habit of confounding our theoretical musings. Witness the political dissension that has erupted in North Africa and the Middle East, toppling some governments and implanting doubt into others about their long-term prospects.

In *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, the companion volume to *Writing Culture*, Marcus and Fischer argued (1986:32) that at the very heart of postmodernism, or what they referred to as interpretive anthropology, is “revitalized and sophisticated” relativism. One of their main goals was to integrate the interpretive and political economy perspectives, but for the most part their efforts fell flat and the stumbling block was relativism itself and the conception of culture that it implies. Unlike the usual charge that anthropologists have exaggerated the uniqueness of cultures, Marcus and Fischer contended that the discipline has greatly minimized cross-cultural diversity in order to legitimate universal generalizations central to the program of comparative anthropology. Equally curious, in view of their recognition that as a result of social change the very notion of authentic, unique, self-contained cultures is now an anachronism, they continued in Geertzian fashion to envisage the anthropologist’s role as documenting the “distinctiveness among cultures” (1986:43) while encouraging conversations across them.

Two observations can be made about the several analytic dimensions of postmodernism that have been inspected so far. First, although none of them is quite as important as the literature crowd claims, all of them, including ethical rather than epistemological relativism, have something to offer anthropology, and deserve to endure. Second, none of them is by definition restricted

to the realm of literary criticism. Put otherwise, if the literary theorists disowned them, they still could flourish in the social sciences and other disciplines. This is not the case for the one dimension of postmodernism that most clearly evokes its origin in the English Department: the focus on ethnography as a type of writing, a type of literature, a text in its own right. All ethnographies are said to be fictional, not in the sense of being make-believe, but in the sense of being partial representations that have been fabricated, created. As texts, they can be analyzed using tools of literary criticism such as tone, style, metaphor and allegory. With the focus on ethnography as a type of writing, it was only a short step to the recommendation that ethnographers experiment with literary modes and mixed genres, such as inserting personal reflections about fieldwork next to the “objective” data. As Nader (1988:153) observed: “Anthropologists have moved from insisting that the anthropologist stay out of the ethnography to having the anthropologist’s presence dominate the ethnography.” Such self-indulgence has been condemned by the critics of postmodernism, and even Marcus and Fischer (1986:42) label it as a form of exhibitionism that is quite expendable.¹

Rabinow has not only pointed out the parasitical nature of Clifford’s work, feeding off the texts of others, but he has also wisely summed up the limited significance of the focus on ethnography as a type of writing (1986:243): “The insight that anthropologists write employing literary conventions, although interesting, is not inherently crisis-provoking.” One of the unfortunate consequences of postmodernism was to pull anthropology under the tent of the humanities. This state of affairs is no less unhealthy than placing the discipline alongside physics. The literary imagination and the sociological imagination may well be equally illuminating but they are also different. To be indulgent myself for a moment, when I first visited Nigeria to teach in a secondary school, I had just graduated with a B.A. in English and philosophy. At that time I saw everything through the lens of creative literature and aesthetics. When I returned to the country about three years later after having switched to anthropology, it was as if I had entered an entirely new world; everything was saturated in anthropological theory.

Why did anthropology put up so little resistance when it was dragged towards the humanities? The quick answer is that a number of changes predating the literary perspective had rendered the discipline vulnerable. Behaviour and causality had given way to a focus on meaning and interpretation, to things said rather than done; and model-building, generalization and explanation had been replaced by an emphasis on particularism, individual choice and

unstable social structures. All of this went against the enterprise of science, and opened the door to the promotion of the ethnographic field setting and the texts fashioned from it as fragmented and incomplete, and to the replacement of value-neutrality by political agendas on behalf of "the Other."

Not to be overlooked was the role played by anthropology's most celebrated practitioner at the time, Clifford Geertz. With thick description as his slogan, and epistemological relativism as his methodology, he defined anthropology (1973) as an interpretive science in search of meaning rather than an experimental one in search of law. He also lamented the lack of experimentation in ethnographic writing, portrayed culture as "an assembly of texts," and compared ethnographic analysis to the penetration of a literary document. If this were not enough sweet music for postmodernists, Geertz also referred to anthropological texts as fictions, something fashioned.²

A broader question must be asked: why did postmodernism in general, not just its focus on writing, emerge when it did and sweep over the intellectual landscape like a tornado? During the past half century, anthropology has been hit by two major crises, each of them the consequence of massive social change. The first occurred in the 1950s, when the impact of two world wars, the onset of the information age and the end of colonialism caused such confusion among anthropologists that there was doubt whether the discipline could survive. Of course it did, thanks to fieldwork adjustments (including a nascent anthropology at home) and the appearance of a number of novel theoretical perspectives over the next two decades.

By the 1980s, crisis struck again. Globalization swept the world, and in the process transformed culture in two significant ways: local cultures partially crumbled and signs of a uniform global culture made their appearance. Emerging from the shock waves of the transformed nature of culture were two dramatic shifts in the intellectual direction of the discipline. One consisted of a devastating attack on the concept of culture. Instead of regarding culture as the apotheosis of human achievement and celebrating cultural uniqueness and diversity, scholars such as Abu-Lughod (1991) portrayed culture as a discourse that stereotypes, homogenizes and essentializes "the Other" for the benefit of the West. The solution advocated by many of the critics was to ditch the cultural concept and focus on concepts that profile power, such as Said's discourse and Bourdieu's practice.³

The other dramatic shift was equally devastating. For most of the discipline's history, the dominant problematic had been how to square the immense variation of dis-

tinctive cultures around the globe with the presumed underlying mental and biological unity of *Homo sapiens*. However, if local cultures have been fragmented, and if a global, uniform culture has emerged, the old problematic has lost its *raison d'être*. It no longer makes sense to ask how culture can be squared with underlying mental and biological unity if sameness also exists at the surface level. In view of the fact that both our key concept and our basic problematic had been rendered obsolete by the forces of social change, little wonder that the discipline was a pushover for the proponents of postmodernism.

Despite their opposition to grand statements and generalization, postmodernists have mounted some pretty hefty ones themselves. Trouillot (1991:20) announced that "the metanarratives of the West are crumbling," and Tyler (1986:123) wrote science off as "an archaic mode of consciousness." The important implication is that postmodernism is not merely a figment of the imagination of scholars or "academic sport" as Singer (1993:23) put it. Instead, it is paralleled by ongoing massive changes in the empirical realm. In other words, a postmodernist world exists independent of the manner in which it has been conceptualized. This explains why political science, sociology and geography have also experienced their postmodernist moments.

The postmodernists appear to be right on the money in arguing that the West's privilege and power are fading and in questioning the goal of unlimited economic progress, but it would be ethnocentric to think that the rest of the world has necessarily followed suit. In China and among its neighbours, science and technology and the economic growth that they produce are not on the wane. Instead they are the engines that are redefining the global stratification system.

Anthropology after Postmodernism

Knauff (2006) argued that a genuinely new kind of anthropology has emerged from the ashes of postmodernism. He calls it "anthropology in the middle." It is in the middle not only because it focuses on middle-range institutions, but also because it refuses to pay homage to any specific theoretical or methodological approach, dismisses the polarized exemplars of the past—the grand theoretical treatise and the data-rich monograph—jumps across epistemological divides and jumbles together the local and the general, and objectivity and subjectivity. Knauff suggests that this new style of anthropology can be described as post-paradigmatic. Yet it strikes me as a sort of anchorless eclecticism that attempts to convert disciplinary confusion into a virtue, one that is bound to be short-lived.

What will replace it, however, and provide the discipline with coherence and confidence is essentially unknown, at least in the long run, because future social change is itself unknown. The short-run is not quite as inscrutable. In addition to social change, our theoretical perspectives are influenced by internal conceptual oppositions such as meaning versus behaviour and subjectivity versus objectivity. Each successive perspective tends to reverse the conceptual package embedded in its predecessor. It would not be surprising, then, if positivism resurfaced, but hopefully in its softer guise.

Another clue about the direction the discipline will take concerns our old problematic. The same forces that undermined it gave birth to its replacement. Human beings share not only mental and biological make-up, but increasingly cultural make-up as well. Yet they remain divided. How to explain?

Under the old problematic, cultural difference was almost treated as a natural phenomenon to be documented and celebrated. With the new problematic, difference is a social and political product reflecting advantage and disadvantage. In other words, difference is problematized. Instead of taking for granted the existence of unique cultures and then encouraging conversations across them, as Geertz does, we ask how such difference was produced in the first place. Thus Gupta and Ferguson stated (1992: 14): "We are interested less in establishing a dialogic relation between geographically distinct societies than in exploring the process of *production* of difference in a world of culturally, socially, and economically interconnected and interdependent spaces."

With difference profiled, the discipline inevitably must concentrate on stratification and its principal components: class, gender, ethnicity and race. Power is also highlighted because it is embedded in these components. Indeed, such have been the numerous sources of power as a focus in recent years that it appears to have displaced culture as the discipline's new god-term, as D'Andrade (1999:96) put it so well. In my judgment, we are better off with power than without it, but it is not a magic bullet, and indeed no less ambiguous than other key concepts (see Barrett 2002). Nor does its high profile mean that there no longer is any room for culture, especially if its explanatory capacity is not exaggerated and if it absorbs the message in cultural studies (Rosaldo 1994: 525): "culture is laced with power and power is shaped by culture."⁴

We should not lose any sleep wondering whether fresh theoretical perspectives comparable to those that rejuvenated the discipline back in the 1960s and 1970s will emerge. The imaginations and ambitions of our colleagues will render new models almost as predictably as social

change itself. What we should be concerned about is the current state of ethnography and the global vitality of the discipline. Too many of our efforts go into recycling the ideas of our colleagues (I'm guilty), or producing ethnographies necessarily heavy on theoretical discussion because the data base is thin.

I advocate a new ethnographic wave (NEW). It will not be easy because fieldwork, whether abroad or at home, may be more challenging today than it was in Malinowski's era. We are no longer figures of unquestioned authority, nor can we expect to captivate our readers because of the stunning novelty and exotic flavour of our findings. Then, too, many of the most significant problems that we might want to investigate will require a battery of techniques, not just participant observation.

For example, I am very interested in the recent transformation of the Canadian military from peacekeepers to a fighting force, but cannot quite figure out how to approach it as a fieldwork project. Yet participant observation remains the key to our discipline's success and reputation. Imagine the impact had anthropologists produced a dozen or so outstanding ethnographies from all points of the globe on the banking system and the financial realm a decade or so ago. I am not advocating a mindless empiricism, nor do I wish to devalue the theoretical excursions of my colleagues. But I am suggesting that if we want to emerge from the postmodern era stronger than ever, and possibly even enhance our reputations as public anthropologists, we need to get back to what has always made us so special: impeccable ethnography.

Anthropology's early cross-cultural framework encouraged the pretense that it was a universal discipline, but of course its home base was the West. With colonialism a thing of the past, and globalization a reality, one would have thought that the discipline's universal ambitions were now within reach. Yet unlike the hard sciences, anthropology's academic centre continues to be in the West, and possibly the same can be said about all of the social sciences. Why should that be so? Certainly there are practitioners of anthropology and the other social sciences throughout the non-Western world. But their voices are not often heard above those of their Western colleagues. Perhaps the explanation is no more complex than Western arrogance, which devalues the contribution of others. Or possibly, anthropology and the remaining social sciences have been defined by elites elsewhere as ideological disciplines covertly expressing Western values, and thus as inimical to non-Western interests. Whatever the explanation, the prospects of anthropology may well depend on the efforts of the next generation of practitioners to revive the ethnographic

tradition and to furnish the discipline with genuine global credentials.

Stanley R. Barrett, *Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Guelph, 50 Stone Road East, Guelph, Ontario, N1G 2W1, Canada. E-mail: sbarrett@uoguelph.ca.*

Notes

- 1 In my judgment very little of value has emerged from either dialogical texts or mixed genres. Curiously, as I learned from personal communication with the authors, two of the most impressive examples of the former and the latter were not consciously intended as postmodernist texts: Julie Cruikshank's *Life Lived Like a Story* (1990) and Peter Carstens' *Always Here, Even Tomorrow* (2007).
- 2 The well-known irony is that Geertz and the postmodernists eventually ended up taking potshots at each other.
- 3 It should be pointed out that there is a remarkable similarity between the old consensus-conflict debate and the current controversy between culture and power.
- 4 In view of my generally unsympathetic appraisal here of the long-term impact of postmodernism, it is ironical that Cerroni-Long (1999:13) singled me out as the one contributor to her edited volume who was especially favourably disposed towards the perspective. Yet I continue to think that a focus on authority, discourse, resistance and representation enriches anthropology, despite the criticisms that have reduced their explanatory promise. I wish I could be as positive about dialogic texts, but regrettably the record suggests otherwise.

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila
1990 The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women. *American Ethnologist* 17:41-55.
1991 Writing Against Culture. In *Recapturing Anthropology*. Richard G. Fox, ed. Pp. 137-162. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research.
- Barrett, Stanley R.
2002 *Culture Meets Power*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Carstens, Peter
2007 *Always Here, Even Tomorrow*. Philadelphia: Xlibris.
- Cerroni-Long, E.L., ed.
1999 *Anthropological Theory in North America*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Clifford, James
1983 On Ethnographic Authority. *Representations* 1:118-146.
- Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus, eds.
1986 *Writing Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Cruikshank, Julie
1990 *Life Lived Like a Story*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- D'Andrade, Roy
1999 Culture Is Not Everything. In *Anthropological Theory in North America*. E.L. Cerroni-Long, ed. Pp. 85-103. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Fortes, M., and E.E. Evans-Pritchard, eds.
1940 *African Political Systems*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, Michel
1980 *Power/Knowledge*. Colin Gordon, ed. and trans. Brighton, Sussex: Harvester.
- Geertz, Clifford
1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic.
- Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson
1992 Beyond "Culture:" Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference. *Current Anthropology* 7(1):6-23.
- Knauft, Bruce M.
2006 Anthropology in the Middle. *Anthropological Theory* 6:407-430.
- Marcus, George E., and Michael M.J. Fischer
1986 *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nader, Laura
1988 Post-Interpretive Anthropology. *Anthropological Quarterly* 61:149-159.
- Ortner, Sherry B.
1995 Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37(1): 173-193.
- Rabinow, Paul
1986 Representations Are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology. In *Writing Culture*. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds. Pp. 234-261. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Rosaldo, Renato
1994 Whose Cultural Studies? *American Anthropologist* 96:525-529.
- Scott, James C.
1985 *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Singer, Merrill
1993 Knowledge for Use: Anthropology and Community-Centered Substance Abuse Research. *Social Science Medicine* 37:15-25.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph
1991 Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness. In *Recapturing Anthropology*. Richard G. Fox, ed. Pp. 17-44. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research.
- Tyler, Stephen A.
1986 Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document. In *Writing Culture*. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds. Pp. 122-140. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.