

Between Community and the Other: notes of Cultural Anthropology.

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Abstract:

The question about the role that the Anthropological Research plays for the studied culture is strictly linked to the epistemological evolution of the concept of *Otherness* in Cultural Anthropology. Considering this evolution, the Author proposes a solution to this interrogative that contrasts the anthropological pessimism of the recent critics of Modernity.

Keywords:

Modernity, Otherness, Cultural Anthropology, We, Community

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Some preliminary questions:

When the researcher is called to transform her fieldwork into a written work, accessible for a large audience, she must face some interrogatives that are fundamental for the same writing up of the research: *How does the researcher relate herself to the object of research and to her public? What is the potential role that the research may play for the studied community?*

These two questions may seem almost a prudery or a philosophical caprice. However, through them one can (re)read the entire evolution of the concept of *Otherness* in the context of Cultural Anthropology. In the next pages, I would like to offer an indicative summary of such evolution, and a possible, but actual, answer to the interrogatives in regard to the recent critics of Modernity.

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1.

In the last decades of XIXth century, Anthropology became known as the discipline that studied the culture(s) of Humanity, "*the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society*" (Taylor 1903 [1871]). Intellectually spurred by Darwin's theories and the new geographical discoveries brought with the colonial conquests, the founding fathers of the discipline approached the study of the (more or less) remote communities aiming to the comprehension of the human cultural evolution from its origins (Claessen 2002).

This research moved from a theoretical presupposition, which was debated and surpassed in the last decade of the century: all the culture could have been compared thanks to their participation to a

unique evolutionary model of which fulfilment was the Western culture. Laying on this epistemological model, the anthropologists identified themselves with the Western culture and did not consider their social role and the differences and the contradictions that might exist within the West. By the anthropologists, the Western society was lived, when it was not overtly recognized, as a *We*. Thus the researchers considered themselves to be culturally coinciding with their public and completely separated from their subjects of study due to the “racial”, linguistic, religious, economic, etc. differences. Consequently, the subject of research appeared as the cultural other -the *Other*- that was opposed to the *We*.

Turning back to our initial questions, at the dawn of the discipline, the anthropologists culturally identified themselves with their public. In this way, it was created a barrier against their subject of research. In the evolutionistic perspective, which based on the assumption of the superiority of the Western culture, the study of the *Other* implicitly supported and confirmed this sense of superiority without pushing the anthropologists to encounter with the studied community.

2.

As a confirmation of such division, it is to underline the rarity of anthropological researches based on fieldwork during the XIXth century and the early decades of the XXth century. One example can be the work by Cushing (Cushing and Green, 1990). The information were collected through the work of agents present on the field (missionaries, colonial and military offices, local erudite men, etc.), and analyzed by scholars in their universities. The Anthropology was a speculative discipline where the direct interaction between anthropologist and the studied culture was not considered a necessary element (Gaillard 2004 [1997], 1-39). In this regard, the lack of interaction can be considered a further element that enforced the barrier between *We* and *Other*.

The seminal work of Malinowski, *Argonauts of Western Pacific* (Malinowski, 2002 [1922]), was able to break such barrier. In this volume, it was affirmed and “consecrated” the necessity of a direct study of the *Other* and ethnography became part of the methodology of the discipline. Ethnography (Sanjek 2002) based the comprehension, almost the assimilation, of “the native’s point of view” (Geertz 1984) on the direct contact of the researcher with the studied community. Thus, this method brought along a redefinition of the role of the anthropologist: being called to live in direct contact, cheek to cheek, with the studied population, the anthropologist became a bridge between cultures, an agent of dialogue between the culture of *We*, the one of the anthropologist and her public, and the one of her subject of research. Through this dialogue, the otherness was not only explained, as in the case of the research by Benedict (e.g. Benedict 1967, 1989 [1935]), but it can also work as a starting point for a cultural social critic of the *We*, as happened in the work by Boas (e.g. Boas 1940) and Mead (e.g. Mead 1975).

3.

Thanks to the success of Anthropology in Europe and the USA, a growing number of non Western students dedicated themselves to the study of the discipline. From the 1930s, the background of these new practitioners obliged the reconsideration of one of the fixed points of reference within Anthropology: the ascribability of the researcher to the culture of her public. As we saw before, since the XIXth century the discipline laid on this principle to defining the intellectual role of the practitioner. The new generation of scholars, however, were not able unquestionably to call for such belonging. On the contrary, in particular in the case of the researcher who engaged the studied of their native community, they claimed to be part of the studied culture, what the public of anthropology writings considered being the *Other* (for one example of such early works of native anthropology see Fei 1962 [1939]). This kind of research, which Malinowski defined “[...] *the most arduous, but also the most valuable achievement of a fieldworker*” (Malinowski 1939), brought along the definition of a new way to do anthropology, where the practitioner was organic part of the studied culture and no more an external agent.

The discussion of the new epistemological questions this approach brought along, and the analysis of the role of the native anthropologist, in particular to the study of non Western cultures (Fahim 1982), were some of the most important topics of the international debate in Anthropology during the '60s and '70s (Kuper 1994). Within the scientific community, whilst the cultural debate in the West was focused on the decolonization and criticized and surpassed the unquestioned and unquestionable idea of the cultural "superiority" of the West, it was theorized a new way to do anthropology "from the within" that took name *Native Anthropology*. In this approach, the anthropologist was no more part of the Western culture, but she was a member of a native community, the Other. Thus, through Native Anthropology it was asked to the discipline not only to bridge between the Other and the West: Anthropology should have become the epistemic tool thanks to which the native community could make and regain possession of cultural traits forgotten due to the colonization and, hence, mature consciousness of itself.

4.

Whilst in the '70s, anthropological debate was characterized by the reflection on the decolonization and the radical critic of the concept of Otherness (see for example: Said 1978), the evolution of the discipline in the following decade was distinguished with the reception of the theories of the post-existentialist philosopher, such as Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, in the scholarship. The impact of such philosophies, which stimulated the individual, thus the researcher, to a deconstructivist analysis of herself and her acting, was realized in the great emphasis that was given to the *reflexivity* (Ruby 1980 (revisited 1997)). This is the ability that calls the researcher to ask to herself "*why [she] is there, who sent [her], what [her] relationships are with [her] respondents, for whom [she] will write up his study and what specific problems [she] faced in the field*" (Ahmed 1980, 18-19). In the light of these questions, the anthropologist becomes herself the subject of her research because, as Ahmed argued in the same pages, "to answer to these questions may provide insight into the mind of the researcher and [her] own relationship with the topic of his study." Thus, the reflection on the social role played by the researcher and her research in the studied community became an organic part of the ethnographic research (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

The centrality of reflexivity not only tinted the discipline with a solipsistic allure (the one vividly criticized by Marshall Sahlins' famous joke. See Jessor et al 1996, 21-25). It renewed the disciplinary debate about the role of the anthropologist within the studied community, the impact of the interaction between her and the community, the bond between the researcher and her subject of study, and the very model of knowledge that ethnography could offer. This debate and the theoretical experience matured within Native Anthropology created the ground where Anthropology at Home strived. Among the enthusiasm (Herzfeld, 1987, 1992; Jackson, 1987, Masserschmidt 1981) and the perplexity (e.g. Gellner, 1992) that this new approach raised, this new approach obliged to a deep analysis on the role of Otherness as a prerequisite of the anthropological research. In fact, whilst, in the previous decades, the otherness of the subject of study had defended as guaranty for objectivity and, thus, the value of the research, the familiarity with the field negated the possibility of such requirement. Such a simple observation brought to a redefinition of the concept of cultural Otherness and nativeness. These features were considered like dynamical elements. As Narayan underlined:

"we might more profitably view each anthropologist in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations. The loci along which we are aligned with or set apart from those whom we study are multiple and in flux. Factor such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or sheer duration of contacts may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status." (Narayan 1993, 671-672) Thus, to creating a new basis for the analysis of any cultural reality and to comprehend its multiple facets, the application of such fluid conception of otherness brought along a further effort by the researcher in regard to reflexivity (Edwards 2000, 11-12).

5.

In the '90s, the theme of Otherness has continued to play a fundamental role in the Social Science, after the intensification of the world's economies and national cultures (Castells 1996, 1997, 1998). The debate on Anthropology at Home, even though it never implied the impossibility of the construction of the We, showed the fragility and the arbitrariness of any one of these constructions since they were etched by the fluidity of the otherness. The critics of Modernity that appeared in the '90s and the 2000s (e.g. Bauman 1999 [1998]; 2000; Connerton 2009) called into question the very possibility to define such We. In the globalized world, the acceleration of the movement of goods and people and the increasing relevance of the role that the media played in the life of every individual would have thrown in crisis the past social roles and the cultural paradigms, on which the past constructions of We were based. It resulted in the *multiple otherness* (Gomez-Pena 1993, 21; Jandt and Tanno 2004, 209) of the global citizen: her inability to identify herself in any stable form of We. Consequentially, since she could not adhere to any model of We, an idea of the community to which she feels to belong, she would be surrounded by innumerable Others. At the same time, and also she would be turned to be Other for herself, since she was not able anymore to formulate a satisfying model of individual to which she fell to espouse.

Today, when Anthropology approaches an analysis of the Present, it must face such theories that are antithetical to the description of any community. Thus, it is necessary to (re)start from the idea of the community to finding an answer to the anthropological pessimism that these models are imbued of. It is, however, necessary a preliminary consideration before to resolve this task. The idea of "community" is far from being eradicated from the social dynamics of the West, the so called epicentre of the globalization. The sense of solitude may be a spread experience among the urban population of the XXIst century (Bauman 2001). However, it is due to this diffusion, that since the '90s, in all Europe it is become common the phenomenon of the "escape" from the urban centres. This escape is not only justified for an economic reason (for example, the attempt to find a habitation that is cheaper and wider than the houses one can find in the cities). In fact, there is also a cultural justification that is embodied in the research of a place where to become "*terra e paese*" [earth and village], using Cesare Pavese's expression. This research of the *paese* (Clemente 1997) expresses the attempt of the individual to (re)find the lost dimension of life within a community. Even though it does not negate the sense of unhomeyness and solitude of individuals, but it demonstrates the survival of the concept of community in the globalized world and the importance it still has. By having showed the lasting of the idea of community and how the individual actively operates in the attempt of the concretization of such idea (e.g. Grimaldi 1996, 2009), it is necessary to comprehend what is a community today and offer a definition of this idea that will be compatible with the *multiple otherness*. In front to her research, the anthropologists need to define such reality and, possibly, to regain possession to their subjects of research of the element through with they can refind a We, which may be lost. Whilst the ethnographic practice can offer specific answers to the question "*What is a community?*", in the last part of this paper I offer my contribute to a theoretical solution to the question.

6.

The condition of *multiple otherness* and the concept of community can be reconsider in the light of Foucault. In his famous inaugural lesson at College de France (Foucault 1971), he presented a dialogical vision of the world. In this context, the individual's action must not be considered as finished and per se concluded. In fact, they all are part of a higher signifying entity, the *Discourse*. To Foucault, the Discourse is the grand cultural mechanics through which the history of mankind developed and the continuous development of the human scenarios are generated. The characteristics of the Discourse do not universally manifest in a univocal way. The phenomenology of the Discourse, in fact, is characterized by discontinuities (Foucault 2002 [1969]). The grand Discourse, which is "Unlimited, continuous and silent" (Foucault 1971), is presented as

“discontinuous practices that cross each other, sometimes they come side by side, but also they ignore or exclude each other” (Foucault 2001 [1994], 30). The practices of the Discourse are the aggregative moment in Foucault’s philosophy. Around them all the individuals that participate to the evolution of the same idea are gathered. Through the archaeological study of any idea (Foucault 2002 [1969]), one can define a community of individuals that shares the mutual participation to the development of the particular practice of the Discourse. Since the different practices would be development along different special and time trajectory, and by considering in Foucault’s acceptance that the individual would contribute to the development of numerous practices, the individual would be called to be the member of several communities, during her life. This interpretation can be applied to offer a renewed analysis of Modernity. In fact, in this perspective, the belonging to multiple communities would be an inevitable anthropological condition that have touched all the mankind since the origins of its Discourse, rather than being a tragic innovation caused by Modernity. The increased mobility and the possibility of communication would have only pointed out and exasperated such phenomenon. In Foucault is not negated the psychological difficulty of belonging to several community, which can result in the sense of *multiple otherness*. However, it is reduced to a sort of anthropological normality. In this regard, even though keeping in mind the idea of otherness as a fluid category, it is possible to recognize the entire complexity and non exclusivity of any sense belonging but reintegrate and re-establish the category of “We” into its fundamental role as a pillar of the anthropological research.

Conclusion

In this notes of anthropology, I tried to sketch a short summary of the evolution of the concept of Otherness along the evolution of the discipline. By observing some of the most relevant stages of this journey, one sees that the scientific community has thrown in discussion the meaning of We and the capacity of the individual to belong to a particular community along the debate about the entity of the Otherness. By riveting that still nowadays the idea of community and the sense of belonging to it are strong and diffused concepts in the globalized world, beside what is stated by critics of Modernity, I intended to offer a theoretical model to neutralize the anthropological pessimism of such critics.

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