



Beyond Ethnography: Anthropology as Nominalism

Paul Rabinow

Cultural Anthropology, Vol. 3, No. 4. (Nov., 1988), pp. 355-364.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0886-7356%28198811%293%3A4%3C355%3ABEAA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-S>

Cultural Anthropology is currently published by American Anthropological Association.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/anthro.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Beyond Ethnography: Anthropology as Nominalism

Paul Rabinow

Department of Anthropology
University of California, Berkeley

Much has been made (a good deal of it salutary) of the experimental moment in anthropology, of a heightened awareness of the text, of discourse, of the anthropologist as ethnographer and critic, of a postmodern polyphony of voices, of the end of meta-narratives, of dispersal and subversion, of metaphors and allegories and tropes, of Orient and Occident. Meanwhile. And what if anthropology has not dispersed into ethnography, voices not displaced analyses, tropes not triumphed over concepts? What if Anthropology—the study of Man, that being who is the subject and object of her own knowledge—proved more enduring than the dulcet denunciations, the muddlers through, and the tropification of the tropics? The articles presented here suggest such a possibility. In order to introduce them we turn first to Michel Foucault, a figure absent from *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*.¹

In 1961, Foucault published his major thesis for the *doctorat ès lettres*, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* as well as a *thèse complémentaire* entitled *Introduction to Kant's Anthropology*, a commentary on Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (translated by Foucault). Throughout his university career Kant taught only two courses with regularity: physical geography, the world as nature (quite popular with students), offered for over 30 years starting in 1756; and anthropology, the world as human, offered for the last 25 years of his teaching career, starting in 1772–73. The *Anthropology* was published only in 1798, shortly after Kant retired (Foucault 1961). Although Kant's admittedly curious anthropology has not been the subject of extended commentary in contemporary histories of the discipline of critical social thought (Norbert Elias (1982) does indeed mention it), Foucault privileged its potential modernity, seeing in it a refraction of Kant's three critiques on the level of a pragmatics of the everyday. Pragmatic is the key word. Kant distinguishes the *practical* point of view, which treats the moral community of thinking beings (*esprits*), from the *juridical* point of view, which treats civil society as composed of lawful subjects, from the *pragmatic* which treats man as a "citizen of the world," as a concrete universal (Foucault 1961:27). Foucault concluded that Kant's *Anthropology* occupied a strategic position since it treated a critical truth about Man—the irreducible reality of the diverse forms of the concrete—the daughter, as the phrase goes in French, of the

critique of truth. Anthropology, the daughter of philosophy, was destined, he might have added, to be more modern than her father.

Kant's reflections on anthropology, developed during 25 years of courses and culminating in his *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View*, spans his precritical and critical philosophy. It bridges the *cosmological* period of Kant's thought in which the whole is understood as having an already given lawlike order, and the *cosmopolitical* period in which the world appears as that which is already in time and hence a domain without origin, continually to be constructed, that is, in our vocabulary always already historical and cultural. From the cosmopolitical perspective, we are always in a given world, already always here before us. While, by definition, there is only one universe, there are several worlds—"es mag viele Welte sein" (Foucault 1961:74). These worlds are wholes, but not everything: not *Alles* but *einer Ganze* (Foucault 1961:5).

Given this pragmatic, cosmopolitical approach, it follows that Kant's question, "What is Man?" can only be answered fully not transcendently but through the complementary analysis of concrete forms of what Kant calls "play," *der Spielen*, the domain where freedom and nature, the universal and particular, are inextricably interconnected. Kant calls this domain, *gebrauch*, Foucault translates this as *usage*, and today we would probably call it *practices*. Practices occupy the domain of already given pragmatic relations to the self, to others, as well as to things. These relations are singular in their content but universal in their form; they are, in Kant's terminology, popular and systematic. While the systematic dimension is the subject matter of the three critiques, the popular dimension is the subject matter of anthropology. The task, as Foucault puts it, is:

L'élucidation de ce langage tout fait,—explicite ou silencieux,—par lequel l'homme étend sur les choses et entre ses semblables un réseau d'échanges, de réciprocité, de compréhension sourde, qui ne forme au juste ni la cité des esprits, ni l'appropriation totale de la nature, mais cette habitation universelle de l'homme dans le monde. [The elucidation of this already constituted language—explicit or silent—through which men open out to things and between themselves, a network of exchanges, of reciprocity, of a muffled comprehension, which forms, it is true, neither the city of spirits, nor the total expropriation of nature, but that universal habitation of men in the world. Translation by P. Rabinow.] [1961:94]

As these worlds appear only from the horizon of the present, whose frontiers they form, they function as limits to who we are and what we can know, hope, do. These worlds, along with the structures of our reason, constitute the limits of our experience. For that reason, anthropology taken pragmatically occupies that place where humans learn to recognize their own culture as "*l'école du monde*," a kind of *Bildungsroman* of daily life, in which universality and particularity are joined in a singular relationship. Although Kant did not take the next step, one could consider the domain of universals as no longer separate from and regulative of particulars in a transcendental sense but rather as itself a pragmatic, cosmopolitical practice.

L'universel naissant au milieu de l'expérience dans le mouvement du *vraiment temporel* et de *réellement échangé*. [The universal being born in the milieu of experience

in the movement of the truly temporal and the really exchanged. Translation by P. Rabinow.] [Foucault 1961:102; emphasis in original]

It took a long set of historical and cultural changes before such a possibility appeared—before culture in the modern American anthropological sense was given form and became a normative concept. Today, we, witnesses to the concept of culture's partial triumph and contemporary decline, remain with the question Kant posed to anthropology (but did not answer): what can we expect from Man?

Reason After Weber

Tracing the rise of the concept of culture, not to mention the practices which accompanied that rise as well as its current crisis, is obviously beyond the scope of this introduction. Rehearsing a few of the major steps, however, may prove helpful in situating the following articles as well as continuing, perhaps refocusing, a discussion of its future. Worthy of note is Kant's attention to the empiricity, "subject-ness," historicity of everyday life, his incestuous pairing of the empirical and the transcendental. These themes have been and continue to be taken up, if not exclusively, at least significantly by Germans. The pluralizing of the Romantics who followed Kant (Herder, Schiller, etc.) was ambiguous from the start, cast as it so often was, if not against, at least in an uncomfortable relationship with synthesizing and universalizing discourses. Possible relationships of norms and forms, of thought and facticities, took only a small number of paradigmatic relationships in Western social thought. Most pertinently here is the divide between those who attributed a significant degree of autonomy to culture (and character) from the social or economic circumstances in which they arose and those who attributed a determinate hierarchical relationship to these variables. Drawing the map in this fashion we find those like Marx and Durkheim for whom "belief is basically an emanation of social circumstances," and those like Nietzsche, Weber, and Foucault, who problematized the relationships between these levels without, it is true, arriving at a stable analytics of their interrelationships (Schroeder 1987:212).

To mention only the most momentous of Western cultural formations and frankly to simplify again, both Marx and Durkheim understood religion in socially functional terms (however different the valences they assigned to its function) and science as the universally adequate vehicle for representing reality. Whatever the magnitude of the effort required, a determinate truth was discoverable and articulable in essentially unproblematic terms. Further, the search for truth and what this search revealed were themselves both ethically and politically good things. The true, the good, and the beautiful remained isomorphic: consciousness remained happy, if often didactic and thin. Authority, Marx and Durkheim would have agreed, arose out of this isomorphism of science and politics although obviously they did not concur on what the isomorphism was. It follows that for these thinkers the role of the scientist was relatively unproblematized. History, character, and truth were at least potentially transparent. Everyday life could be read by the scientist who knew its telos, its structure, its meaning. For

Nietzsche and Weber, in contradistinction, to take up only the thread of character, a researcher's character could, nay, was obliged, if he were to understand, to achieve a certain autonomy from the social formation of the time:

Nietzsche and Weber both believe that the individuality of the person can be realized only through an adherence to convictions that are set apart from everyday, practical considerations. Or to put it differently, authentic individuality exists only in so far as the adjustment to mundane necessity is surmounted. [Schroeder 1987:213]

While Durkheim and Marx's anthropology retained a certain Enlightenment optimism and universalism, Nietzsche or Weber's diagnosis of the modern life world was a bleak one. However, they, too, retained, in a different form, what Foucault has called "the speaker's benefit," the right, pleasure, and duty to announce to a resistant and philistine world a difficult truth. The pure subjectivity of their values is precisely what allowed them to stand against the grain of the banalized, bureaucratized, and disenchanting capitalist, Christian world they both characterized as modern. The price in psychic suffering both Weber and Nietzsche paid for this privilege is not to be underestimated (Mommsen 1984).

As with Nietzsche and Adorno,

Weber stands in a long tradition of an educated middle class, for whom culture and sensibility were allotted a pre-eminent place . . . the integrity of the complex personality requires the support of an estate society, for it is the estates that make viable the various life orders through which the individual acquires his or her identity as a cultural being. [Whimster 1987:261, 266]

Authority was ethical. Ethics was class based. To that extent while Weber was arguably more modern than Durkheim in his problematization of science and religion, he retained, clung to, an older, pre-Enlightenment value: the ethical character of the knower as a requirement and guarantee for truth. In the sciences of nature the separation of the ethics of the scientist from the objective conditions of knowledge, of character from physical nature, was one of the conditions for the scientific take-off. It was reasonable to believe that such a disjunction in the sciences of man would produce a parallel take-off. While it is arguable that such a take-off in social technologies of control did take place, few would plausibly maintain that a parallel scientific threshold has been crossed, even if the "cargo cult" of about-to-be-achieved science remains relatively robust. Following down the path of Nietzsche's transvaluation of values, Max Weber forever sociologized reason. We can now see that his powerful institutional and comparativist grid carried with it a baggage of metaphysics. Weber's interpretation of modernity, that the world's telos led to the total rationalization of the life world, while obviously sociologically far-reaching, has proved less comprehensive than Weber feared.

Ethnography: Write He Said

Kant's anthropological query remains unanswered. While some approaches place instrumental ends at the summit of their value hierarchy—political econ-

omy, whether liberal or Marxist, seeks to change things (the trope goes: “alter the world, no longer interpret it”) hence its instrumental approach to reason and culture—cultural anthropology promises to teach us some-thing (Dumont 1977; Sahlins 1978). If anthropology’s goal is not the manipulation of things but practice as *apprentissage*, then ultimately one must learn some-thing. For Kant, as for Goethe, as even in a tenuous manner, for Nietzsche and Weber, this some-thing was found in the space opened between classical culture and modernity. However critical the anthropological humanism, the first century-and-a-half of thought about modernity claimed man as a norm for understanding. The fact that no paradigm-altering social thinkers have emerged since the First World War—is Heidegger the exception who proves the rule?—may well be linked to this paradigm: How can the fragmentation of bourgeois culture, through the undermining of its claims to universality, in which cultural anthropology has played an important role, be overcome, opened to world horizons and thereby be re-universalized?

The development of the sciences of man took a particular turn in the United States. Many factors could be pointed to in Franz Boas’ transmogrification of German *Geisteswissenschaften* into American cultural anthropology. One of the variables that has received much attention of late is fieldwork, although its status as an independent variable is suggested by the equally strong valorization of fieldwork in British social anthropology which did not result in cultural theory.² As I have argued elsewhere, over the course of two generations the content of Boas’ ethical, political, and scientific agenda gradually was emptied out: for example, the valorization of cultural difference against racial hierarchies became the valorization of cultural difference per se; the scientific and ethical authority of anthropological fieldwork originally cast against that of the missionary or traveler, became an issue of generalized authorial deconstruction seemingly for its own sake (Rabinow 1983). Humanism tends toward nihilism as long as no-thing is valued except the process of humanism itself. When sensibility and taste are all that remain as sources of authority, the line between a certain heroic stoicism, self-congratulatory trendiness, and exhilarating invention is often hard to trace. Following Pierre Bourdieu we could say, as a rule of thumb, the purer and more asociologically nonreflexive the “taste” and “style,” the more they are expressions of distinction, social status, and local tactics (Bourdieu 1984).

For Geertz, and his textualist nephews, authority has moved to the third of the Weberian life spheres, after residing in truth, then ethics, it has now become aesthetic (Habermas 1984). However, if we agree that “modernist art is the result of the inward collapse of a conventional artistic life world. Its products constitute a flattening of the moral landscape, and create a completely different and new sense of the individual” (Whimster 1987:288), then its heroism lies in confronting its own “failed representations of totality.”³ This heroism of modernist life, or at least irony of its limits, is hard to find when the aesthetic becomes merely a sense of style (as opposed to form), the ability to write (as opposed to change language), to convey imagery (rather than contest standard representations), to evoke (rather than provoke). Authorial ethnography: what had been a part has become the whole. We are left with ethnographies with no-thing to teach except

residual bourgeois pieties (pieties because of their nostalgia not because they are worthless, quite the contrary): the self-cultivation of the anthropologist, and the principle (hovering ambiguously between a virtue and a value) of tolerance. The focus on no-thing is the great shortcoming, disillusionment, of Geertzian anthropology. Although we do learn from this anthropology how different things can be, it is silent about who we are. When it abandoned its Weberian questions and retreated into neo-Kantian ones, it involuted, flattened out, and just when a tidal wave of writing on this modernist position swept across the Atlantic, it ceased theorizing itself. We remain out of time not only in the sense of a refusal of coevalness with the Other in Johannes Fabian's terms, but in a strict sense, in a refusal of coevalness with ourselves. It is doubly uncritical, offering no diagnosis of what it sees in the world, it fails as well to deliver on the (Kantian, Boasian, Benedict-ine) promise to teach us some-thing with cosmopolitical import. Write, he said. About what? Kant's ghost asked.

Nominalism: Reason and Society

I begin with the assumption that we can analyze reason in the same general way that we analyze other ethnographic objects, that is, as a set of social practices bearing complex *pragmatic* relations with a congeries of symbols. Seen in this light, the practices of rationality constitute a largely uncharted domain. The practices of reason, particularly discourses of social science, have been an essential component of life in the modern world; without them late capitalism, socialism, and welfare society are literally unthinkable as well as unpracticable. Reason, whatever else it may be, is a historically locatable social relation, an action in the world—a set of practices. In *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Rabinow 1989), I attempt to demonstrate what one such anthropological analysis of modern practices would look like.

Another term whose practices and symbols we have failed to take sufficiently nominalistically is society. Although we more or less accept "society" as a quasi-natural or universal term, in fact, it acquired its current meaning in Europe during the early decades of the 19th century. An ethnographic approach to society consists in a history of a new object (really a set of objects) and those authorized to make truth claims within it and about it—these statements cluster around the key symbol "norms"—as well as of those practices and symbols which attempted to localize and thereby regulate and represent that new reality, that is, forms. Since it was held that, like the body, society should be representable, the problem for social thinkers, reformers, architects, engineers, and emperors was how to bring the normative and its form into a common frame that would both represent and regulate society so as to produce a healthy, efficient, productive functional order. The elements of society (composed of knowledges, forms, symbols, and practices) emerged separately during the course of the 19th century: first in the transformations of medicine, then architecture, statistics, biology, geography, history, colonialism, and finally their combination at the end of the century in modern urbanism. This synthesis of historical and natural elements into a representable

object—the planned city as a regulator of modern society—can be seen as one of the most complete exemplifications of modernity. It was exemplary in its demonstration of man's ability to operationalize into a comprehensive functional form, in the name of the general welfare of the population, previously naturalized elements (geography, demography, hygiene) as subjects of pragmatic knowledge as well as its awareness of history (monuments, styles, cultures) as the ground of legitimacy holding future society together.

Urbanism provides a particularly privileged space for exploring the interconnections of practices and symbols of reason, representation, society, modernity, and modernism. Between 1899 and 1909, a group of Ecole des Beaux Arts-trained, prize-winning architects of whom Tony Garnier is the most famous, together at the Villa Médicis in Rome, articulated the principles of modern urbanism in France. Their projects ranged from Garnier's renowned *Cité Industrielle*, to Henri Prost's (future head of urbanism in Morocco, Istanbul, and originator of the first regional plan for Paris) reconstruction of Constantinople, to Ernest Hébrard's (chief planner in Thessalonika, Indochina, and active in socialist Garden city planning around Paris) proposal for a universal world capital, a center of science, art, and industry. Whereas for Garnier the contemporary industrial situation dictated a socialist welfare response; and while Prost, in a literally as well as politically more conservative fashion, looked to history and culture as a reservoir of elements to be drawn from in order to achieve a socially healthy order; for Hébrard, history revealed a specific trajectory toward centralization, peace, interdependence, and the triumph of universal norms for humanity. Each of these architects, we might say, attempted to operationalize historical, economic, natural, and cultural variables into a representable spatial social form. One could say they were modern but not modernist; they have been largely ignored in the modernist textbooks of architectural history because they did not question the Beaux Arts compositional principles, or neo-Classical style, only their scale of application. By so doing, however, they opened the way for a major reinterpretation of spaces and societies.

The secondary literature has stressed Garnier's relation to the socialist utopian tradition of Cabet and Fourier. I interpret Garnier's plan as the urban parallel to Bentham's Panopticon. Foucault read Bentham's Panopticon not as a Weberian ideal type, that is, the sociologist's generalized abstraction of the various currents of empirical activity of an age, rather he emphasized an alternate use of such plans as strategic exemplars, as a means of illuminating not a whole age but particular nuclei of knowledge and power. Garnier's plan for an Industrial City is an attempt to encapsulate the urban principles of the industrial age. Its aim was not the efficient discipline of individuals but the transformation of the historico-natural milieu into a healthy, peaceful, and productive environment. It coherently brought together specific geographic, sociological, economic, educational, athletic, administrative, domestic, historical, hygienic, and architectural considerations into a general scheme in which form was guided by the latest scientific norms. This schema was guided by the welfare of the population embodying a strategy of inventing and regulating a social order in which both force and politics would be-

come unnecessary. Garnier's scheme was modern in its attempt to bring together the social and the individual within a common set of self-regulating norms and forms drawn from the latest scientific advances and specific historical and natural conditions used as grounds.

The triumph was provisional. The continuing search for more scientifically, spatially, and stylistically comprehensive means by which to both represent and regulate a society devoted to efficiency, production, and the welfare of its population led to a second series of dissolutions and transformations. This second step, accelerating after the First World War, entailed the transformation of the object to be worked on from a historico-natural milieu into a sociotechnical one. This new object could be called modernist: society had become its own referent to be worked on through technical procedures that were becoming the arbiters of what counted as socially real. Both norms and forms were becoming increasingly autonomous from previous constraints, defined by their own operations, norms, and practitioners claiming ahistorical and acultural universalism.

Modernity: You Have No Right to Despise the Present

Many of us would endorse Baudelaire's ironic injunction, "you have no right to despise the present" (1955:127), interpreting it today as a call to write the *History of the Present*.⁴ This task entails the kind of self-reflective, critical awareness outlined above. It also means research. All of the work in this issue is the product of sustained historical, ethnographic, and sociological fieldwork. It instantiates, in one vein, much of what has been called for programmatically under the title of the "new ethnography." However, to continue the article's vocabulary, perhaps it would be better to see it as a set of examples of a "new anthropological" inquiry. The following articles are written by present or former graduate students at the University of California at Berkeley. However, as a kind of truth in advertising disclaimer, these articles should not be taken as representative of the variety of research under way in the Berkeley anthropology department. Nonetheless, there has been a sustained set of discussions and seminars in conjunction and counterpoint with stays at Berkeley of Michel Foucault, Michel de Certeau, Jürgen Habermas, and others. While there is certainly a confluence of interests demonstrated in the articles, the only school in formation would be a peripatetic one of inquiring "anarcho-rationalists," doing their *apprentissage* in the *école du monde*.

Notes

We dedicate this issue to the memory of Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau.

¹Foucault's name does not figure in the index of *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Michel de Certeau is also absent.

²An important recounting of this story, albeit cast in other terms, is found in *Victorian Anthropology* (Stocking 1987).

³The quote is from Susan Stewart's comments on a panel on "Transnational Practices" presented at the AAA meeting in Chicago, 1987. On totality, see: *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas* (Jay 1984).

⁴This phrase is Foucault's (1979[1975]:31).

References Cited

- Baudelaire, Charles
1955 *The Mirror of Art*, Critical Studies. Jonathan Mayne, trans. London: Paidon.
- Bourdieu, Pierre
1984[1979] *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Richard Nice, trans. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Dumont, Louis
1977 *From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Elias, Norbert
1982 *History of Manners: The Civilizing Process*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, Michel
1961 Introduction a l'anthropologie de Kant. Thèse complémentaire pour le Doctorat ès Lettres, Université de Paris, Faculté des Lettres et de Sciences Humaines, Directeur d'Études: Jean Hyppolite.
1972 *Histoire de la folie a l'âge classique*. Rev. ed. Paris: Edition Gallimard.
1979[1975] *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Alan Sheridan, trans. New York: Vintage Books.
- Habermas, Jürgen
1984[1981] *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, Vol. 1. Thomas McCarthy, trans. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Jay, Martin
1984 *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept From Lukacs to Habermas*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Marcus, George E., and Michael M. J. Fischer
1986 *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mommsen, Wolfgang J.
1984[1974] *Max Weber and German Politics, 1890–1920*. Michael S. Steinberg, trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rabinow, Paul
1983 *Humanism as Nihilism: The Bracketing of Truth and Seriousness in American Cultural Anthropology*. In *Social Science as Moral Inquiry*. Robert N. Bellah et al., eds. New York: Columbia University Press.
1989 *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Sahlins, Marshall
1978 *Culture and Practical Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schroeder, Ralph
1987 Nietzsche and Weber: Two 'Prophets' of the Modern World. In *Max Weber: Rationality and Modernity*. Sam Whimster and Scott Lash, eds. Pp. 207–221. London: Allen & Unwin.

Stocking, George, Jr.

1987 *Victorian Anthropology*. New York: The Free Press.

Whimster, Sam

1987 The Secular Ethic and Modernism. *In* Max Weber: Rationality and Modernity.

Sam Whimster and Scott Lash, eds. Pp. 259–290. London: Allen & Unwin.