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La distance avec le sujet anthropologique

I have never believed it possible or even desirable to guarantee full anonymity to people who talk to me. Adopting a journalistic 'off the record' intimacy with people changes the relationship between us in unnatural ways. Fictive intimacy is constructed artificially around two inescapable facts: the anthropologist will be leaving in the near future, and any inadvertent use of locally-strategic information or other social blunders are excusable by his or her alterity. My intimacy with the natives is not off the record and not fictive. Because I lived in a bourgeois milieu for several years, I could not claim either of these fictions, and 'they' knew precisely how to situate me in my own cultural hierarchy. The people whose life narratives I use (sparingly, for reasons that should be obvious) to illustrate the many currents that define the local meaning of bourgeois can read English, their names can be found (when they want) in telephone directories and in the newspapers, and in the context of an extremely class-sensitive local culture, can be recognised by their peers or by anyone willing to spend some time in Rome. My special status vis-à-vis the Roman bourgeoisie is that I was 'one of them' in a way that most anthropologists cannot emulate in other contexts, that I shared some aspects of their private as well as public worlds. We rarely engaged in 'interviews' as most anthropologists would understand the term. Our relationship was much closer in some ways, certainly of longer duration and very intimate in comparison. In the final analysis, it was governed by their rules, not by so-called anthropological ethics and methodologies.

Studying an elite as a means to understanding place and time, even one as ambiguous as the Roman bourgeoisie, forces us to confront some of the very implicit assumptions by which methodological issues have been framed in the anthropological literature. For example, I attended a conference in which an economic anthropologist described his field techniques when comparing how people who live in similar lower-middle class neighbourhoods in two major European cities used objects in the household – furniture, trinkets, carpets, appliances – to establish personal and social identities. He had gone door to door, explained his intentions and usually had been invited in to interview people and take photos of their living rooms. Nothing seems different from hundreds of other urban and rural fieldwork situations encountered by anthropologists everywhere. That is in fact what we tell our students setting out to do field research: just go, be honest in describing your purpose, and treat people as you would like to be treated. Some will like you and collaborate, others will not.

I thought, what would have happened had I followed this more or less classic method of doing urban fieldwork (i.e., going to the local pub, parish hall, unemployment office, or knocking on doors) in Rome in order to make contacts? The answer is, nothing. First, this approach works well only if we assume that people have *a* home. Elites often have several. Second, this method works if people live by a fixed schedule and 'go home' after 'work'. Elite schedules are different because they are busy professionals or because they

do not work as such or because they socialise much more than members of the North American middle class. They do not usually sit in front of the telly after or during supper. Third, this system works only if someone in authority in the household answers the door and can negotiate with the anthropologist. Elites often use maids and butlers to screen people and isolate themselves from annoying people like anthropologists. Fourth, granting that negotiations are somehow opened if the first three obstacles are overcome, elites often have receiving rooms that are designed for the (albeit highly selected) 'public'. These rooms are distinct from the 'family' rooms in a house, and I cannot imagine anyone getting beyond what the North American middle class calls the 'living room' (*saloto*, receiving room, parlour, front hall – everything and anything except the rooms where the family 'lives'). For example, most elite houses I know in Rome have a 'guest' bathroom, so even a surreptitious attempt to see beyond the home's public space (and asking to use the bathroom is a guarantee that the interview is a one-shot thing) would probably lead to nothing. Fifth, I cannot imagine photographs and measurements being permitted even if some form of access were granted in the form of interviews.

Distance –la notion de « distance » est lié à une hiérarchie du pouvoir qui reste souvent implicite mais néanmoins présente: quand on étudie des élites, les rapports de pouvoir qui normalement séparent l'anthropologue et son sujet sont souvent renversés, et donc la distance symbolique est mise en doute; ceci peut mener à des déséquilibres émotifs ainsi qu'intellectuels.

Attirés par l'exotique ou par les marges du système mondial où les rapports de pouvoir sont souvent mis à nu, les anthropologues peuvent étudier des peuples qui ont un statut inférieur, car, malgré l'orientation libérale et tolérante de l'anthropologue, il reste, avec ses caméras, son calepin, son enregistreuse, quelqu'un qui est clairement associé à l'ailleurs, ce qui veut dire, pour les personnes marginalisées, associés aux centres du pouvoir. Les personnes moins puissantes sont souvent engagées dans une opération psychique d'appropriation – leur politesse, leur tolérance, leur patience avec l'anthropologue sont en partie une manifestation de leur position marginale dans le système mondial. Autrement dit, elles parlent et tolèrent l'anthropologue parce qu'elles peuvent en tirer quelques bénéfices, ou elles ont tout simplement naturalisé un masque public plus servile et plus sociable. Pour les élites, non. Ils sont psychiquement engagés dans une position de protéger leur statut parfois menacé par le bas, et l'anthropologue « du bas » (en comparaison, parce qu'il leur demande quelque chose – leur temps) est donc symboliquement menaçant.

The problem of the implicit limits of the discipline becomes even more obvious when anthropologists – most are middle class – do research with people of higher social and cultural standing. For example, I attended a few conferences (I will not mention names) dealing with people's research into elites, and the atmosphere was, frankly, disgusting. Jokes and snide comments, smirking, condescension, pandering to class envy among the student public (themselves often children of professionals given to temporarily style-slumming while in university); in short, things that would be unacceptable and unforgivable had the subject been a marginalised and disempowered people. I cannot begin to imagine the consequences of someone saying the things I heard said about the

rich and powerful if he or she had made the same comments about Jews or Kosovar Albanians. Such a person would immediately become a pariah to the profession. In this case, however, the audiences seemed to lap it up, with scattered tittering and cheap comments about cultural traits presented as quirky foibles rather than grist for analysis. Even the slavish admiration of a Robin Leach giving us a not-so-secret glimpse into the lifestyles of the rich and famous would have been preferable and more honest. At least we would know more about what the rich and powerful thought about their lives rather than knowing what the anthropologist and audience feel about privilege, not to mention we would have a chance to see homes in detail. Instead, such comments block analysis because we believe we 'understand' the trait in terms of established ideological positions. (Declaration: "Can you believe it? They actually raise their pinkies when they drink tea!" Private reaction: "How snobbish!" "How pretentious!" "How decadent!", and so on).
In print, the situation is a bit toned down: "outrageous", "irreverent", "effectively ridicules the widespread notion that money is omnipotent...", "acerbic", "hit-and-run" are some of the blurbs on the cover of Lewis Lapham's *Money and Class in America* (1988); things are much more nasty on the inside cover. A work with more pretensions to anthropological rigour, George Marcus' *Lives in Trust* (1992), has fewer critical blurbs, but the thrust is just as clear as in the first example: [the rich live in] "complex *little* worlds in processes of gradual self-destruction" (my emphasis). Standard textbook fare such as Yanomami duels, in which men stand around bashing each other on the head with clubs when they are not kidnapping women (which leads to a lot of the head-bashing) never mentions that they are *self-destructive* or that there are probably a lot fewer Yanomani head-bashers ("*little* worlds") than Texas millionaires. If the envy and aggression of the people described in Oscar Lewis' *The Children of Sanchez* (1961) or *La Vida* (1966) were admitted to be negative, the culture of poverty (as Lewis called it) was presented as not being their fault or their choice. They were part of a larger system in which they were victims, a status that anthropologists seem reluctant to confer on members of elites who are, of course, not victims in any usual sense of the word although they may be just as likely to be prisoners of their own culture as anyone else. All in all, not a very complimentary picture of anthropology and its vaunted cultural relativism, which only seems to work when looking down the status ladder or far away. Le Wita's treatment (1988) of Parisian bourgeois is much more restrained and neutral in tone, but perhaps this is due to the fact that the author is herself European and more at ease with a Western class system. It is, in any case, the exception that proves the rule.

Even the methodology of fieldwork changes when working with elites. One cannot depend on one's training in these circumstances. Field notes are out of the question in most circumstances. No one would consent to saying anything that would be written down; not only for reasons of confidentiality but because it would be gauche. The anthropologist with his notebook would be on par with the man who comes to read the gas meter. For example, if I met, say (and I am not admitting I did), the former head of the secret services who discussed the workings of a secret government sponsored anti-communist organisation, or the former head of a large bank who discussed the financial shenanigans of the heads of the political parties he had dealt with over the years (involving secret deals for tens of millions of dollars), or the person who was party to

rigging the votes in a region for decades, there was no question of taking notes, then or ever. Anthropologists have for decades faced this dilemma in other circumstances; what to do when an Australian Aborigine reveals secret clan knowledge? Most anthropologists would not publish this knowledge verbatim but nonetheless interpret it. However, they couch their reserve in terms of a moral position that translates into the axiom of cultural relativism: confidentiality not only preserves 'their' people from unfair and uninformed criticism (about their eating bugs, marrying their cousins, and so on), it also gives the anthropologist exclusive access to the moral high ground that, in effect, confirms the gap between Us and Them. In contrast, one may feel a bit tempted to betray confidences from members of Western elites; anthropologists are almost always ready to claim a moral high ground but usually to denounce the powerful rather than protect them. I am not arguing that one should or should not be more 'truthful' when dealing with elites; I am saying, however, that the temptation to 'put them in their place' reveals a lot about the implicit limits of the discipline.