

terms of sociological laws. Understanding depended on observation of meaningful interaction, in order to discover the meanings specific to that time and place which actors attributed to their own and others' behaviour. When we *explain* other people's behaviour it is not necessary for our intentions to coincide with theirs. We can explain why a car skidded off the road at a bend, without needing to understand why the driver was travelling too fast, in the rain. Our explanation can be put forward by applying general laws: the centrifugal force of the turning car, the friction of the tyres on the road and the lubricating effect of water. When we try to *understand* other people's behaviour, the test of our success is whether the meanings we attribute to their actions correspond to the meanings they intend. Have we successfully intuited why the driver was travelling too fast? Was he late for an appointment? Had he felt slighted by another driver? It is the subject community, not the observer, that sets the criteria for successful understanding. The same objects and actions mean quite different things when interpreted in the idiom of different cultures. It was this distinction Evans-Pritchard hinted at in his 1950 Marrett lecture (see chapter 4), and recent trends such as Feminist Anthropology belong to the broader interpretive tradition than, narrowly, to the Postmodernism which draws upon it.

Postmodernism means different things to different people. This is, in fact, the central irony of a word which is used to dispute the possibility of any grand theory of human behaviour. This chapter will outline four strands in the writing of Postmodernists and trace their relation to the broader tradition of interpretive sociology.

- 1 The arrogance of the Enlightenment, or modernist conceit that the white, European male can detach himself from his culture and take a comprehensive, objective stand in his study of the world.
- 2 The error of supposing that theories enable knowledge of the world 'as it really is'.
- 3 If meanings are constructed through interaction, there can be no pre-existing Durkheimian 'collective consciousness'.
- 4 There is no ivory tower for the scientist to retreat into; all theories are inherently political and must be judged by their practical effects on people's lives.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Postmodernism and anthropology

In chapter 4, interactionist theories were shown to have laid the grounds for two divergent trends in anthropological thinking. One, provoked by the model of social life as a game in which the moves consist of transactions in goods and services, was developed by the Marxist anthropology which dominated the 1970s and taken up in different ways by Socioecology. Both argue that the outcome of such games can be explained in terms of general laws which operate independently of the participants' intentions. The second trend, prompted by the model of cultural interaction as a language, is the subject of this chapter. Social life is interpreted as transactions in meaning, rather than in substance.

This approach has its roots in a German tradition of interpretive sociology which influenced both Boas and Weber. Boas, although by training a natural scientist, had come to favour a historical/interpretive approach to cross-cultural studies. As early as 1887, he wrote, 'civilisation is not something absolute but... relative, and our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilisation goes' (Boas 1887: 589, quoted by Stocking 1982: 13). The German sociologist Weber, drawing on the same philosophical tradition, distinguished between *explanation* and *understanding*. In his book *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (*The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation*), Weber contrasted causal explanation and interpretive understanding (Weber 1947 [1925]: 79ff.). Explanation depended on recording statistical regularities in human behaviour which could then be explained in

The modernism to which Postmodernism opposes itself is the tradition of objective knowledge created during the Enlightenment, when acceptance of divinely revealed truth and a divinely ordained social order was replaced by the idea that we can discover the truth of how the world works for ourselves by empirical investigation, and construct a better society for ourselves. Comte divided the evolution of human thought into three stages of increasing objectivity. At first, humans explained events as the outcome of the arbitrary actions of gods, then they became sophisticated enough to formulate metaphysical abstractions. Finally, human thought achieved a third stage in which the world was explained in terms of scientific truth. Western Europe was unique in its success in attaining the third phase. Although nineteenth-century theorists such as Marx and Durkheim recognised that cognition is generally shaped by culture, they had always 'privileged' their own perspective as if it were exempt from such constraints. Durkheim, for example, envisaged the progressive evolution of human systems of thought from what he supposed to be the wholly socially determined structure of the original totemic system, through the relatively rational philosophies of ancient China to the totally objective thought of his own time and place. Postmodernist anthropologists reject Marvin Harris' claim that there is difference in kind between native ideas and the objective knowledge of the scientist. 'Only by recognising the difference between emic and etic definitions... can a demystified... strategy avoid the sterile relativism of the Boasian programme' (Harris 1979: 238). Postmodernist anthropology draws upon Boas' theoretical position, seeing Western thought as itself culturally relative.

Contemporary Postmodernists can, for convenience, be divided into two schools. 'Hard', or extreme Postmodernists such as the French philosopher Derrida claim that structures of meaning can never be translated in their entirety and are not anchored by reference to the outside world. All cultures, including our own, have constructed autonomous, self-contained worlds of meaning. The 'soft', or moderate Postmodernism of Derrida's contemporary, Foucault, owes more to the interpretive tradition, arguing that there are communities who share a common 'discourse' but that, while each discourse has its own rules, reference can none the less be made to things that exist independently of that discourse and can affect its form.

### The arrogance of the white, European male

#### *Situating the anthropologist*

In 1973 Cree and Inuit hunter-gatherers living around James Bay, at the southern end of Hudson Bay, obtained a court injunction to halt the construction of a dam to feed a hydro-electric generator until their rights to the land had been recognised (Feit 1983). During the ensuing hearings, an Inuit witness refused to take the oath when asked to swear to tell 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth' because, he said (after a whispered conversation with the interpreter), he could 'only say what he knows' (Harvey Feit, personal communication; cf. Clifford 1986: 8). Postmodernist anthropologists commend the Inuit witness' caution.

#### *Feminist anthropology*

One of the most important challenges to the conceit of the European male observer's comprehensive objectivity is posed by feminist anthropology.

In the English-speaking world, reappraisal of Malinowski's fieldwork had a seminal impact. When his diary was posthumously published (Malinowski 1967), it became clear that the emotions he had experienced in the field were often different to those he had admitted in his published work. This was particularly damaging because it was Malinowski, foremost among the Functionalists, who had set out to write himself into the ethnographic account, describing his emotions and frustrations, and providing an eye-witness account of his observations (Malinowski 1922: especially 4-8, and see above, chapter 2). Weiner's fieldwork further demonstrated the incompleteness of Malinowski's account.

During 1971 and 1972, Annette Weiner carried out ten months' research in a Trobriand village close to where Malinowski had worked half a century earlier. Almost as soon as she had begun fieldwork, Weiner was invited to attend a mortuary ceremony. She walked to the ceremony with local women who were carrying bundles of dried banana leaves and grass skirts. Once at their destination, she found them, and many women from other villages, engaged in complicated transactions which involved piling thousands of such bundles in the central clearing of the hamlet. On her return home that evening, she

looked in vain for any reference to this custom in Malinowski's work. Weiner's subsequent fieldwork confirmed many of the details of Malinowski's account of Trobriand funerals but she also found that her emotional response to these rituals differed markedly from his. Malinowski's diary revealed that he was revolted by the way that death was handled and this, in Weiner's assessment, accounts for his emphasis on 'the bizarre and "primitive" quality of rituals surrounding death... [whereas she] was left with a sense of beauty: a feeling that to die in Kiriwina is much more humane than to die in a sterile hospital room' (Weiner 1976: 63).

Unlike Western money, Trobriand exchange goods are embedded in social relationships. Trobriand men control property which they use to gain power. They do so through the chains of transactions studied by Malinowski which link named individuals over several generations such as, for example, in the transmission of ownership of a particular plot of land. Weiner concludes that men's power is situated in historical time and space. In Trobriand ideology, however, men have no part to play in procreation. Women are wholly responsible for conceiving and bearing children and play a critical role at funerals, ensuring that the dead person's spirit returns to the timeless land of the dead. Women's power is therefore situated in an ahistorical continuum through which the permanence of the matrilineal group is constantly recapitulated, a dimension which Malinowski had neglected (Weiner 1976: 20, 231). Weiner did not intend her work to challenge the quality of Malinowski's data or insights, so far as they went. As Diane Bell argues (Bell 1993: 29), the strength of feminist anthropology derives not from arguing for the complete relativism of all viewpoints, because that would weaken the force of the feminist insight. Understanding is made more profound when the role of emotion in perception is admitted. Weiner wished both to highlight the role of women and to reveal where Malinowski's interpretations had been limited by the feelings and assumptions he had taken to the field from his own European gender and culture. 'Our assumptions of the social construction of reality are bound to follow a male-dominated path when we deny, for example, the significance of objects labelled women's things' (Weiner 1976: 12). Like the Inuit witness, Malinowski could only say what he knew.

Henrietta Moore shows how a male anthropologist working with the Marakwet of Kenya would have gained a very partial view of male domination. The organisation of space in Marakwet society is an

objectification of the male view of the world. Men's livestock is valued more highly than women's crops. Men should be buried near the dung heap outside the compound, women near the heap of chaff from threshing. Rhetorical ability and responsibility confer prestige on men and husbands should speak for their wives during public disputes. Women may contribute but men say that, like children, women talk before they think. Knowledge is regarded as a body of tradition held in common by men. Men inherit property as of right, but women must negotiate with their husbands to obtain property. This cultural model, however, misrepresents actual relationships of production so as to trivialise women's real contribution. Although women subscribe to the male view when with men, they say different things when they are on their own. Women's initiation ceremonies are held almost every year, bringing together women from numerous villages. A distinct body of ritual knowledge is passed on between the generations of women while the initiates are in seclusion. It is learned gradually over many years. Although obedience to husbands is stressed, girls are also taught about the power of female sexuality and the strength of female solidarity. They are taught that they can put pressure on their husbands by withholding the opportunity for intercourse. They are told how, when a man mistreats his wife, she can call on other women to bind and beat him until he promises to give them livestock. 'The open expression of things which should never be said in public is an important part of the ritual' (Moore 1986: 174). As the girls' initiation proceeds, older women stand outside the house where they are secluded and shout abuse at men. Although the phrases used were often highly metaphorical, they were all obscene, and the women enjoyed shouting them out. If men passed close by, the women reinforced the message with obscene gestures.

Kamala Ganesh, who had grown up in northern India, studied a small group in the south who had gained notoriety for living in a mud-walled fortress in the town of Tirunelveli which the women were never allowed to leave. Ganesh was surprised to find, having worked at length with women inside the fortress that, far from considering themselves trapped and underprivileged, the women were proud to carry the primary responsibility for perpetuating their group. Although this meant suffering some deprivation and hardship, 'they saw themselves as bearers of the tradition of classical womanhood celebrated in myth and literature' (Ganesh 1993: 137).

Neither Western nor Third World cultures are uniform. The extent to which gendered cultural experiences are closed to members of the opposite sex will vary from culture to culture. Both Western and Third World anthropologists come to the field with sympathies and insights that derive in part from their personal histories. None the less, the lesson that no fieldworker can ever achieve a total, bird's-eye objectivity has been advanced forcefully by indigenous anthropologists, who argue that they are likely to be more sensitive to the adverse impact of colonialism than are Western writers (Amadiume 1993: 196–7; Raharjoana 1989: 193). The very indigenous social structures which western anthropologists purport to study may in fact be artefacts of the colonial era. Pancrace Twagiramutara is one of those who have argued that the terms *Hutu*, *Tutsi* and *Twa* were formerly used to identify modes of subsistence shared by people of heterogeneous origin in the region of central Africa colonised by the Belgians (Twagiramutara 1989). Alex de Waal similarly concludes that the colonial powers both invented the idea that the three categories were distinct racial groups and subsequently formalised the division by issuing identity cards specifying which group a person belonged to (de Waal 1994).

#### *Action or reflection?*

Realisation that anthropology had been implicated both in sustaining colonial regimes in Africa, and in the United States' aggression in Southeast Asia prompted Marxist anthropologists to call for a conscious engagement with the oppressive effect of Western relationships with the Third World. Although motivated by the same developments in international relations, Postmodernists have tended to argue the contrary view, that the West's claim to be able to present a unified account of humanity has been irrevocably called into question by the inescapable involvement of academics in oppression. 'There is no master narrative that can reconcile the tragic and comic plots of global cultural history' (Clifford 1988: 15). Postmodern anthropologists are suspicious of uses of theory to promote social change.

Participant observation, the basic research technique of social anthropology, depends on the anthropologist interacting with the people whom (s)he is studying. Postmodernism draws upon the interpretive insight that complete objectivity is rendered impossible by the fact that the anthropologist must *situate* themselves within the community. Men will tend to obtain the male point of view; members of

a dominant European culture will sometimes find it harder to hear dissenting or revolutionary voices. The anthropologist arrives in the community, moreover, already *situated* within their own previous experiences, largely obtained within their own culture. The Austrian sociologist Alfred Schutz developed this interpretive approach in his critique of Weber's prescription for interpretive understanding (Schutz 1972 [1932]). Meaning, Schutz argued, is that which individuals attach to their own acts. Awareness and meaning are obtained by 'reflecting' back, or casting a retrospective glance upon lived experience (*Erlebniisse*) as it carries us forward. For the anthropologist, such reflection will inevitably reach back to experiences gained before starting fieldwork. The particular meanings we attribute to past experiences will change according to when we reflect back upon them. There will always be many interpretive schemes we could draw on and we choose whichever is appropriate to the project in hand. Such subjective activity differs even between individuals who frequently come into contact, but more so between people separated in time or space. Schutz used the term 'intersubjectivity' to describe the condition in which we experience the world as something whose significance we share with others (Schutz 1972: 139). To intuit the subjective meanings another person attributes to the world, we try to imagine the 'project' in which the other is engaged yet, to the extent that our previous experiences differ, we can never fully achieve intersubjective understanding. 'I ascribe to you an environment which has already been interpreted from my subjective standpoint' (Schutz 1972: 105).

Rather than assuming they are gifted with a uniquely Western skill for objectivity, anthropologists have had to learn to be reflexive, to ask themselves what past experiences they are relying upon to interpret an event and how their presence is subjectively interpreted by those they are working with. Reflexivity enabled a new form of ethnographic discourse. It became acceptable for anthropologists to write themselves into the account, to describe their anxieties in the field and their struggles with informants. It also enabled debates with informants to be presented, so that the people with whom one worked were transformed from objects of research into active subjects who participate in an inter-cultural discourse with the anthropologist.

An engaging example of this approach is Paul Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977). Rabinow describes his introduction to a café owner in the old quarter of the city where he began fieldwork. He

Morocco



admits that 'as a New Yorker and a devotee of street life' he felt more at ease in the café than in the expatriate Europeans' quarter. Soussi, the owner of a store opposite the café and Ali, a healer, became Rabinow's main points of entry into the life of the community. Ali's healing had no obvious parallel in Rabinow's previous experience and, as he questioned Ali about his practices, Rabinow's 'common sense world' was changed. Equally Ali, asked to reflect on what he normally did as a matter of habit, had to learn to present his practices to an outsider. 'There began to emerge a mutually constructed ground of experience and understanding, a realm of tenuous common sense which was constantly breaking down, being patched up, and re-examined' (Rabinow 1977: 39). Rabinow is honest about the worry of arguing with Ali, of feeling he had to assert his own feelings in order to avoid becoming a non-person and reflects upon why he felt challenged by Ali's behaviour. As Ali introduced Rabinow to local culture, he comes to seem as much a hindrance as a help. When Rabinow moves to the village in which he hopes to discover the real culture of the region, he finds his motives subjected to wildly unexpected interpretations. He was interpreted as a Christian missionary who had come to subvert Islam. Ali's family belong to one faction in the village. One man from another faction asserted that the interview to which Rabinow was subjected by the local gendarme was a warning that anyone who spoke to the anthropologist would be thrown into jail (whereas the gendarme was simply asking Rabinow whether his car was properly registered).

Theories must also be situated. The nineteenth-century evolutionism of Herbert Spencer can all too easily be shown to legitimate colonial expansion, by presenting the free market economy of Western Europe as the inevitable outcome of an unfolding process of development, earlier stages of which had survived in isolated corners of the world. Functionalism can be seen to deny the effects of colonial domination and to facilitate the British colonial policy of indirect rule by reconstructing the mechanisms of pre-colonial government. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is an extended exercise in situating Western understandings of the 'other'. The structure and orientation of the present volume is itself undeniably situated by my own vicarious experiences as a student in 1968, the more recent collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, work on Australian Aboriginal land claims, and employment in England during a prolonged period of government by a party committed to free market policies.

### Theories do not enable knowledge of the world 'as it really is'

Language has a fundamental property which was recognised by Rousseau and emphasised by Saussure: the connection between sounds or written forms and ideas is *conventional*. The sounds we use to denote ideas, only 'mean' something because our cultural tradition agrees they should. It is arbitrary whether we use the sound *horse*, *cheval* or *equus* to denote the four-legged animal that neighs. At a more fundamental but contentious level, it has been claimed that the way language structures our experience of the world is also arbitrary. According to this theory, our concepts of time and space are imposed on the world by language. The view was cogently argued in the 1930s by Benjamin Whorf. Whereas English represents time in terms of three basic categories, past, present and future, Hopi represents time in terms of two categories. Whorf could not translate these exactly but attempted to match them against the most 'consonant' concepts in English (Whorf 1956 [c.1936]: 58). Hopi divided time into the *manifest* or objective, and the *manifesting*, or subjective. According to Whorf, what we call the present and past were, without distinction, treated as manifest, while the future was treated as manifesting. However, manifesting included not only the future, but all striving of purposeful desire, by people, or growing plants, or gathering rain clouds. The very distant past, which has been forgotten, shades into manifesting time. The moment of transition between manifesting and manifest time was called 'becoming true'. Hence, Whorf argued, Hopi put much more effort than an English-speaker might consider appropriate into preparing for future events. Earnest hope and good intentions affect the way in which the growth of plants, as well as the performance of human plans, become manifest. Whorf gives some convincing examples of how the everyday behaviour of English-speakers is also determined by the categories of our language (Whorf 1956: 135-7).

Steven Pinker draws attention to the fact that the linguist Edward Sapir, whose ideas influenced Whorf, was himself a student of Boas. While regarding Sapir's analysis of the way that different languages demand attention to different aspects of reality as interesting, Pinker has subjected Whorf's theory to a biting critique. Pinker points out that the Hopi have a sophisticated calendar and recorded days and seasons with knotted strings and notched sticks (Pinker 1994: 59-67). Pinker's argument is that any language is adequate to describe the world and the

examples he uses to challenge Whorf mainly concern what Quine (1960) called 'observation sentences', a point to which this chapter will later return. This does not necessarily affect the argument that different languages embody different theories of causality.

A more extreme argument than Whorf's has been put forward by the French Postmodernist Derrida. Although it was argued in chapter 6 that the human capacity for language was an essential element in the development of the unique scale and complexity of human society, this event can be reinterpreted as a ironic myth of origin in which, from the moment humans first represent the world through arbitrary signs, they cease to know it as it really is (cf. Derrida 1976 [1967]: 145; 1978: 292). Derrida argued that the impossibility of exact translation between languages demonstrates there is no meaning which exists outside language. As he put it, there is no 'transcendental signified'. Since we can only know the world in terms of its meaning for us, knowledge is an artefact of language and as arbitrary as language itself (Derrida 1976 [1967]: 49-50). As language changes, so it becomes impossible to recover the meanings that people intended in the past.

Derrida points out that terms like culture, rationality and progress only make sense because they are opposed to other terms: nature, superstition, stagnation. The virtue of anthropology has been to call the familiar into question by showing that it is not self-evident or meaningful in itself (Derrida 1978: 282). Hobbes and Rousseau questioned the divine validation of contemporary European society by opposing it to another condition, the anarchy or nobility of the supposed original human condition. Previous chapters have shown how Functionalism and Socioecology in turn questioned the self-evident, given character of the 'natural human condition' by showing that it, too, was contrived. Even as anthropology enabled this understanding, however, it was compelled to use the existing categories of Western discourse. The Socioecological theory of territoriality appears to have elucidated one of the weaknesses of Marxism, by showing that the collective ownership of property within small-scale societies is not given in nature but is the outcome of rational self-interest, yet it does so through the culturally specific model of market values. The 'violence' of anthropology occurs at the moment that the cultural space of an exotic culture is 'shaped and reoriented by the glance of the foreigner' (Derrida 1976 [1967]: 113). Derrida follows Lévi-Strauss in regarding writing as a form of oppression, in which the exotic is appropriated,

and reconstituted within our own system of cognitive oppositions. In this view, the history of anthropology is nothing better than a history of misrepresenting others in a word-play on the shortcomings of our own culture.

#### *Azande 'witchcraft'*

Evans-Pritchard's vivid account (1976 [1937]) of what he terms Azande 'witchcraft' repeatedly raises issues of appropriate translation which exemplify Derrida's argument. The Azande live around the area where the modern borders of the Sudan, the Congo and the Central African Republic meet.

Evans-Pritchard was told that certain Azande inherit a substance, *mangu*, which is embedded in their bodies and can be found during post-mortem examination. The substance gives one the capacity to cause harm to others. To realise its potential one must actively wish ill of someone else, becoming a *boro mangu*, which Evans-Pritchard translated as 'witch'. A witch sends the power of their witchcraft out at night, when it can be seen travelling as a white light, slowly to steal the vital organs from the victim's body. Evans-Pritchard once saw such a light travelling past near his hut to settle on a neighbour's roof and, 'curiously enough' the neighbour was ill the next morning (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 11).

Evans-Pritchard found that the Azande did not consider witchcraft miraculous. Anyone can be a witch; you might be one yourself without knowing it. Evans-Pritchard concluded that witchcraft is an *idiom* in which most misfortunes are explained. Craftsmen know that to fire pots successfully they must eliminate air bubbles and pebbles from the clay; carvers know they must use well-seasoned wood if their work is not to crack. Malinowski had similarly pointed out that Trobrianders 'understand that magic, however efficient, will not make up for bad workmanship' (Malinowski 1922: 115). If all these precautions have been taken and the pot or carving still breaks, the Zande craftsman will blame witchcraft. Others may continue to insist poor craftsmanship was responsible.

Evans-Pritchard's most famous example of the Azande use of witchcraft as an idiom for the explanation of misfortune is the case of the collapsing granary. During the heat of midday, people sometimes take shelter in the shade of a grain store. Such stores are built on wooden posts to stop rats from eating the grain. Termites eat the supports and

sometimes cause a granary to collapse. If a man is killed by a collapsing granary, people know his death was caused by the need to shelter from the sun, and by the actions of termites. Witchcraft explains why that man took shelter under that granary on the day it collapsed (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 22). The nub of the problem is that witchcraft explains what Western scientific thought would regard as a coincidence, that is, unworthy or incapable of explanation. It was therefore very difficult to find a suitable translation.

If you suspect you are the victim of witchcraft the first move is often to convene a gathering of the men Evans-Pritchard terms 'witch-doctors': a loaded term, especially in the context of Christian missionising. The Azande witch-doctors' power derives from eating the right substances in the right manner. Evans-Pritchard terms a gathering of witch-doctors a 'seance'. A seance is a spectacular entertainment for the onlookers, but the divinations of witch-doctors have no validity in Azande law. A legal determination requires use of the so-called 'poison oracle', which will be outlined below.

Evans-Pritchard suggests that a seance has three advantages over the poison oracle. It increases the prestige of the man who convenes it. Witches can be frightened away by the witch-doctors' activities, eliminating the need to take more serious steps against them. A seance provides a public forum for expressing grievances against neighbours and spouses. When performing before an audience of commoners, the witch-doctor adopts a boastful, bullying tone not allowable in normal daily conduct but accepted because he is in a trance-like state of heightened consciousness. His manner is taken in good part by the audience because they know his acts and words are imbued with the power of the substances he has eaten. Perhaps the behaviour of television presenters, when they subject members of the public to humiliation in front of a studio audience, is a better parallel than the notion of a 'witch-doctor'. When the witch-doctor accuses someone of witchcraft his claims have an authority denied to other commoners.

Evans-Pritchard talked in detail with a number of witch-doctors to discover how they determined who was responsible for acts of witchcraft. He found that the witch-doctor must, from the outset, be aware of local antagonisms and quarrels within the village. The witch-doctor knows, like a good sociologist, that there are a number of typical enmities in Zande life, such as those between co-wives or richer and poorer neighbours. Before the seance begins, the witch-doctor asks his

client to name, in public, his wives and neighbours. He then uses his magic to determine who is responsible for the witchcraft, dancing until exhausted as he does so. Evans-Pritchard points out that the very fact of inviting the client to advance such names allows the client, consciously or otherwise, to select those most likely to wish him ill. The witch-doctor dances to each name in turn, progressively eliminating those whom he believes not to be responsible, using both his state of heightened consciousness and his intuition of local interpersonal relationships to divine who it is that, at that time, harbours destructive feelings of malice towards the witch-doctor's client. Evans-Pritchard was satisfied that witch-doctors were not charlatans, and believed as strongly as any other Zande in the procedures used.

When he finally identifies the culprit, the witch-doctor often reveals his identity through innuendo rather than by name so that only the client, who best knows his or her personal situation, can be certain who has been singled out. The client again provides some of the necessary links in the process of identification. One might compare it to horoscopes in our popular press which declare that 'romantic situations in the office will take a new turn', although this would trivialise what, for the Azande, is a serious procedure. The process of bringing latent conflicts into the open by coaxing the client to talk through their concerns has also been compared with psychotherapy.

If the client decides to put the witch-doctor's intuition to the test, he must consult the poison oracle. To consult the oracle, a man must wait until the cool of the day, then take some chickens and go to a quiet spot with some friends, preferably including an impartial witness. Here *benge* is prepared from the stem of a particular forest creeper and administered to each chicken in turn. When some of the *benge* has been fed to the first fowl it is addressed inside the chicken. Although Evans-Pritchard translated *benge* as 'poison', the Azande regard it as a sentient agency which can engage in communication. The questioner must make sure the *benge* knows the relevant facts concerning the victim of witchcraft and understands the question. Then the *benge* is given two alternatives:

If x is the case, kill the chicken.

If x is not the case, spare the chicken.

The *benge* answers, but its response must be tested by putting the contrary question after it has been fed to the next chicken. Thus, on the second occasion, the proposition will be:

If x is the case, spare the chicken.  
If x is not the case, kill the chicken.

Once the outcome of the enquiry has been verified, the wing of the diagnostic chicken is taken to the local prince or governor, with a request that the witch be asked to desist. A gentleman, even if certain of his innocence, will always apologise. To respond angrily would only provide further evidence of one's malice.

Evans-Pritchard felt obliged to conclude that although the Azande reasoned logically within the limits of their culture, they could not step outside of that culture and perceive the illogicality of their procedures. 'One cannot well express in its language objections not formulated by a culture' (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 150).

Ahern has neatly shown how Evans-Pritchard was himself victim of the same constraints (Ahern 1982). In translating *berge* as 'poison' Evans-Pritchard based his analysis on the premise that it was a lethal chemical. He tried, many times, to force the Azande to confront this 'truth', but they regarded his questions as silly. When he asked what would happen if you went on feeding more and more *berge* to a chicken Evans-Pritchard intended them to concede that it would eventually die of an overdose but the Azande replied that, if you did so without asking a question, they supposed the chicken would eventually burst. When he pointed out that they removed the stomach and neck before eating a chicken that had been killed by the oracle, the Azande said that was done in case the *berge* went on answering the question after you had eaten it. Contrary to Evans-Pritchard's expectation, the Azande did not seem distressed by such questions, nor did they feel their position was being undermined. They found such questions silly, and told Evans-Pritchard, 'you do not understand such matters' (see Ahern 1982: 308-9). Ahern borrows from linguistics the concept of regulative and constitutive rules (see Searle 1969), and compares the Azande oracle to a game (a concept which was originated by Wittgenstein; see Baker and Hacker 1980). The regulative rules of tennis, for example, define the etiquette (wearing white clothes, not arguing with the umpire's decision on disputed points). The constitutive rules are what make it tennis. If an alien anthropologist appeared at Wimbledon and asked the players, 'Why don't you hit two balls over the net? One of them would be sure to get past your opponent', the players would reply, 'Don't be silly, that wouldn't be tennis.' Evans-Pritchard's questions were inviting the Azande to disregard the con-

stitutive rules of oracular consultation, and these must be followed in order to communicate with the oracle.

The philosopher Quine, working within the interpretive tradition, imagines an anthropologist or linguist arriving in an unfamiliar community and seeking to understand its language. Quine argued that a distinction can be made between words which refer to objects and those which do not. Words like 'rabbit', which refer to objects, can be learned through 'ostension', that is, by pointing to one of the class of objects to which they refer (Quine 1960: 17). Their meaning is unambiguously anchored in the environment. Quine recognised that many words are only partly explicated by ostension. A term such as 'bachelor' can only partly be explicated by pointing to an unmarried man; 'collateral information', that is, knowledge of the cognitive structure of the culture, is required to provide a full understanding of the status of bachelor. Causal theories belong to the cultural structure and a sentence such as 'neutrinos lack mass' (or 'witches send out their witchcraft substance to harm others') lie at the opposite pole to 'rabbit' (Quine 1960: 76). Experience is never adequate to determine which of many possible theories is correct: 'alternatives emerge: experiences call for changing a theory, but do not indicate just where and how' (Quine 1960: 64); 'countless alternative theories would be tied for first place' (Quine 1960: 23). Quine's argument supports to some extent the subsequent claims of Postmodernists that cultural meanings are not determined by an external world but, like Foucault, considers references to the world can provide a bridge between otherwise closed cultures.

### There is no collective consciousness

Just as interactionists had replaced Radcliffe-Brown's idea of social structure with the study of social process so, as anthropologists began to investigate cultural symbolism in daily life, they became dissatisfied with Lévi-Strauss' holistic models of the structure of culture. In his models of totemism and caste, or his analysis of myth, Lévi-Strauss assumed culture had an independent existence as a kind of collective consciousness. Everyone in a 'primitive culture' learnt exactly the same set of symbolic equations as they grew up, because these were imposed on them from outside by the collectivity, and people were incapable of individual reflection outside this collective representation. Any element of individualism would necessarily undermine this collective understanding, and destroy the capacity of symbols to communicate



(Lévi-Strauss 1960: 66, and see chapter 3, above). The trend within Interactionism to interpret cultural life as a process of negotiating meaning led towards a Postmodern anthropology.

Pierre Bourdieu wrote one of the earliest critiques of the Structuralist theory of culture in 1972, constructed around his fieldwork with the Kabyle, a Berber community of Algeria (Bourdieu 1977). Bourdieu criticises a number of aspects of the structural anthropology prevalent in the early 1970s. The anthropologist, an outsider, seems to regard understanding a foreign culture as an exercise in code-breaking, seeking to find familiar meanings, or sense, behind outwardly bizarre customs. It is as if the anthropologist were listening for a radio message transmitted by an enemy submarine which, even though it is in a secret code can, if the code is broken, be revealed to say something as readily understood as 'surfacing to disembark spy at 0800 hours' (see chapter 3). In the same way, anthropologists reduce exotic behaviour to familiar categories such as gift-giving, feuding, familial kinship. How appropriate are such renderings of meaningful behaviour to the way social activities are understood by the participants?

The anthropologist's account, moreover, sets out the structure of the culture explicitly, whereas those within it accept its premises unreflectively. The difference is like the difference between learning a foreign language from a textbook which sets out the rules of grammar, the form of regular and irregular verbs, and learning a language by hearing it spoken. In the latter situation it is difficult, if not impossible (unless one is specially trained), to formulate the implicit rules we rely upon. The meaningful behaviour of people in other cultures can only be understood by themselves within the implicit, unarticulated assumptions on which their behaviour is based. Bourdieu referred to this body of implicit knowledge as *habitus* (compare Malinowski's 'imponderabilia of daily life', in chapter 2). Participants have what Bourdieu termed a *practical mastery* of tact and appropriate behaviour. Elaborate rituals which explicitly spell out people's status, although loved by anthropologists, are actually rare. It is misleading for anthropologists to devote too much space to such exotic rituals in their ethnographies and they should rather concentrate on the implicit routines of daily life.

#### *Culture as text*

As was shown above, Derrida followed Lévi-Strauss in regarding ethnographic writing as intrinsically oppressive, appropriating the

exotic and reconstituting it within our own system of cognitive oppositions. If Derrida were correct, even Bourdieu's efforts to escape from the straitjacket of Structuralism would be futile, since he is obliged to render Kabyle practice in Western terms.

Derrida argued that writing, not speech, is the primary manifestation of language. He criticised Rousseau and Saussure for regarding writing as a secondary medium, a mere representation of speech. Both had deplored the tendency for writing to cause people to mispronounce words through reading them phonetically. In part, Derrida's argument is based on the fact that science and literature are essentially written traditions (Derrida 1976 [1967]: 27). In this respect, Derrida's argument is similar to that of Goody and Ong, who claim that certain types of knowledge are only attainable in a literate tradition (Goody 1977; 1987; Ong 1982). The claim that writing literally has primacy over speech cannot apply to oral cultures, but this is not Derrida's principal line of argument. Saussure recognised that science and literature have a special relationship to writing, and Derrida does not wish to question 'the truth of what Saussure says' (Derrida 1976: 39), an ironic concession, since what Saussure actually said is doubtful (see chapter 3)! Instead, by a sleight of hand, Derrida redefines writing to mean any manifestation of language that leaves a trace or inscription (Derrida 1976: 46-8). In this sense, speech itself is a form of 'writing', albeit infinitely more transitory than writing, in the narrow sense of the word. Derrida rejected the notion that meaning exists outside of language. He follows Saussure in arguing that meaning is created by a chain of *differences*: sounds or letters (signifiers) are differentiated from each other and each is associated with a signified, or mental construct. The meaning of each construct is, in turn, determined by its place in the system, in which it is differentiated from other constructs (see chapter 3). The absence of 'transcendental' meaning outside language has two consequences. First, it is only through the practice of language that differences are established. A language cannot exist only in the present, but is the outcome of practice through which the 'trace' of opposed signs can be detected. Second, if no external constraints are imposed on this practice, meanings will constantly change, through the random 'play' of linguistic differentiation (see Derrida 1976: 50-60). A text persists while language changes, but can only be read in terms of the current state of play within the language (Derrida 1976: 102).

Geertz (1988) argued in a similar, but less radical fashion, that we

cannot go back and check the events which an ethnographer described. Trobriand life is changing and we will never experience it as Malinowski did. We must therefore read ethnographies as texts and ask what it is *within the text* which makes it convincing to the reader. If all cultures are self-contained systems of values and meanings, with no relationship to an empirical world we and the Trobrianders, Azande or Nuer might both experience, then how is it that anthropologists seem to describe other cultures so well? Geertz claims it is through rhetoric, through the persuasive style of writing. Ethnographies are exercises in literary talent rather than the presentation of verifiable evidence. Geertz subjects several famous anthropologists' writing to literary criticism, stating, 'the question here is not the truth of such statements' (Geertz 1988: 63), but how are they made believable (Geertz 1988: 64). Geertz seeks to deconstruct Evans-Pritchard's 'maddening brilliance': how does he trick us into thinking we have directly encountered the world of the Nuer or the Azande? Evans-Pritchard is notorious for not citing references in his work. Instead, the reader recognises his allusions to Weber or Comte and is flattered that they have been admitted to an intellectual club in which everyone shares the same values and accepts the same authorities. Vivid examples are skillfully chosen and presented, as if one were sitting in a comfortable slide show witnessing slices of the exotic brought fresh from the field, such as 'those hapless Zande forever taking refuge from the sun under a store house precisely at the moment when the termites have finally eaten their way through its supports' (Geertz 1988: 64-5). Evans-Pritchard writes in the same relaxed, confident tone whether describing the hazards of walking through long grass, or those of facing enemy rifle fire. The reader follows him as unquestioningly as a soldier might follow an inspiring officer into battle.

Geertz's book is based on lectures he gave one year before the 'Writing Culture' conference which had a seminal effect in confronting anthropology with the challenge of Postmodernism. Rosaldo, contributing to the conference, develops many of Geertz's arguments, and takes Evans-Pritchard further to task for presenting Nuer culture as a unified, timeless whole, rather than an emergent phenomenon, negotiated by living actors. Evans-Pritchard depicts the Nuer as exemplars of an anthropological archetype, the proud but democratic nomad (Rosaldo 1986). Crapanzano, in the same volume, points out how vulnerable Geertz's own writing is to a literary critique (Crapanzano 1986: 68-76).

If the Postmodernist's claim is true, the meaning of his text would be at risk as soon as he sent his manuscript to the printers. If his argument has been correctly transmitted to us, then it must be false. But Tylor, in his contribution to *Writing Culture*, justifies his characterisation of Postmodern ethnography by citing other authorities (Tylor 1986: 132). Derrida likewise claims to be able to 'read' Saussure with confidence; he cites Pierce as an authority. The irony of this process was noted by Umberto Eco: 'If Derrida assumes that his interpretation is the good one, he should also assume that Pierce's text had a *privileged* meaning to be isolated, recognised as such and spelled out unambiguously' (Eco 1990: 35).

The writings of Herodotus and Tacitus have been called into question on the grounds that they reveal the construction of systems of difference, and therefore have no validity as accounts of fact external to the mental constructs of their authors. Tacitus' Germans are constructed as egalitarian, limited in their material desires, chaste, and generally opposed to the values of Tacitus' own culture. The Scythians figure in Herodotus' account as a mirror image of the Egyptians. The Egyptians are the oldest of peoples, the Scythians claim to be the newest. Egypt is dominated by monumental architecture, the Scythian landscape lacks cities, temples and even agriculture (see Gould 1989: 100-9 for an interesting assessment of this argument, and compare Whitehead 1995). It might equally be claimed that Rousseau and Hobbes reopened a classical debate in which the construction of the 'natural' or 'original' human condition underwent a series of transformations unfettered by any empirical observation of small-scale societies. It is less plausible to make such a claim of the Functionalists, even though they undoubtedly relied on some of the conceptual structures they had inherited from the nineteenth century.

Derrida's theory of meaning remains strictly Saussurian in the sense that signs are said only to gain meaning from their position in a system of other signs. It differs from Saussure in denying that linguistic signs make any reference to objects which exist outside language itself. This is a 'dictionary' theory of meaning, in which the dictionary can only define words in terms of other words, or previous meanings of the same word (i.e. it is 'self-referential'). The system is closed and can only refer to itself.

In order to unravel the source of Derrida's paradoxical claims, I shall argue that there are two distinct issues which need to be addressed:

intersubjective understanding in the field and subsequent communication through ethnographic texts.

#### *Culture as drama or narrative*

The constructed character of cultural meanings is unquestionable. Bourdieu argued that, at any moment, the significance of what people are doing as they interact depends on what has previously happened: meaningful behaviour is, as Derrida argued with regard to language, constructed through time. It has a narrative structure. I give you a gift because at an appropriately distant time in the past you gave me one. What will happen next always remains uncertain: there will be a number of possibilities. Habitus is improvisation, not a set of predetermined rules. People may value this uncertainty precisely because it enables them to resolve an ambiguous situation in their favour. Far from individuality being inimical to cultural life, it is integral to the way that meaningful behaviour is actualised. The Kabyle say that 'a man who has no enemies is a donkey' (in other words he is unduly passive). Although the proverb seems paradoxical to us, the Kabyle regard a challenge to one's honour as 'a high point in a man's life'. It is a chance to realise one's potential as a person of honour (compare the Sarakatsani code of honour outlined in chapter 2). The anthropologist who analyses social life as a fixed structure of relationships will miss this dimension. Bourdieu's concept of the construction of meaningful life through action is very similar to Giddens' theory of Structuration (see chapter 4). Giddens drew attention to the processes by which usage feeds back on to the structure of a cultural system. While Saussure recognised agency in a way that Durkheim did not, by introducing the concept of *making selections* from the system, Saussure still regarded individuals primarily as users of a system which existed independently of them, rather than as the modifiers and embodiments of a system which only exists through usage. For Bourdieu and Giddens, however, there is a constant interplay, or negotiation, between existing and new usages.

This is well illustrated by the changing meaning of the expression 'Band Aid'. 'Band Aid' is the trademark of a company which manufactures small sticking plasters to protect cuts and scratches while they heal. Some years ago, it was common to use the term 'a band-aid solution' to denigrate an inadequate and short-term response to a problem. When the popular musician Bob Geldof launched the idea of raising

money to help relieve famine in the Third World by inviting bands to play at charity concerts in Britain and the United States, he called the initiative 'Band Aid'. Geldof's Band Aid was immediately successful, and the connotations of the term were transformed. This is not unlike Derrida's theory of 'free play' in which words gain their current meaning through usages which set themselves in opposition to previous usages. Each usage leaves a 'trace' which, in time, is eradicated by successive transformations of meaning.

Victor Turner took a view which is similar, but different from Bourdieu's in one important aspect. Turner adopted the philosophers Schutz and Dilthey's concept of *Erlebnis* or 'living through', in which life takes on meaning as present problems are related to the past celebrated by the culture (Turner 1990). For Turner, however, the most creative spaces are not in everyday routines but at the margins of social life, in play and joking. Art and life each inform and transform each other, through repeated performances. 'Liminal' moments, such as those van Gennep identified in initiation rites, are eminently suitable for transforming people's perception or 'reading' of social life. It can, in the same vein, be argued that the performance of myth and the production or creation of works of art are moments when the artist/narrator *makes a claim* about the interpretation of cultural events. This is what the Lega ritual expert is doing when he draws on the indefinite possibilities provided by the objects in the Bwami basket to commend or ridicule the initiate (see chapter 3). Kirin Narayan gives a good example of this creative process in her account of how an Indian teacher gives new meaning to a traditional story by identifying the characters of the story with listeners in his audience (Narayan 1993). A more radical process took place as Narritjin and other artists among the Yolngu of northern Australia renegotiated the content and display of their art as they attempted to explain their values and affiliation to the land, to a Euro-Australian audience (Morphy 1991). The process by which anthropologists develop theoretical insights in their ethnographic writing is perhaps comparable.

Within the community under study, people may disagree over the interpretation of events. If people agree on the meaning of a simple gesture or an elaborate ritual, we should try to discover how such consensus is achieved rather than take it for granted as the product of a 'collective consciousness'. Stephen Tylor regards the description of such processes as the defining feature of Postmodern ethnography:

'Post-modern ethnography attempts to recreate textually this spiral of poetic and ritual performance... [as] one of co-operative story making... none of whose participants would have the final word in the form of a framing story or encompassing synthesis' (Tylor 1986: 126).

#### *Culture as performance*

If 'writing' can be presented, following Derrida, as the primary form of linguistic expression, then anthropological fieldwork can be construed as an exercise in reading texts. Postmodern anthropologists have claimed this to be so (Geertz 1973b: 443-5; Crapanzano 1986: 51). I believe their stance glosses over an important distinction; the fieldworker is not studying texts which were constructed in the past, but present performances, coming into being at that moment which, according to Whorf, the Hopi termed 'becoming true'. 'The fieldwork experience itself (unlike its representation in text) is unambiguously two-way' (Ganesh 1993: 139). The process of fieldwork should not be confused with the production of an ethnographic account.

Schutz argued that each community participates in a distinctive 'world of experience' (Schutz 1972: 136). Although we are separated by the divergence of our past experience, where we participate in that 'world of experience', the listener is present as the speaker engages in meaningful discourse, and the listener responds. If we read a book, on the other hand, interpretation is vicarious; 'the reader relives the author's choice of words as if the choice were made before his very eyes' (Schutz 1972: 134). Derrida sought to deny this distinction by redefining writing as anything which separated language from the immediacy of unmediated perception (Derrida 1976: 24). Ricoeur, however, showed that it remains a valuable distinction (Ricoeur 1979). Ricoeur argued that social interactions, as they are carried out, are performances in which the participants have some access to each other's fleeting, subjective intentions. If the listener responds inappropriately, the speaker can try again to convey their subjective intention. This can be illustrated with two examples from fieldwork in central Australia. The Yankunytjatjara word *punganyi* can be translated either as 'hit' or 'kill'. Like many English words, the circumstantial meaning can only be intuited from the context. When Yankunytjatjara speak in English, they generally translate *punganyi* as 'kill'. I was once talking with a Yankunytjatjara friend when he spotted his favourite dog trying to steal meat hanging in a tree. 'Kill that dog!' he shouted. I would quickly have

discovered if I had misconstrued the instruction. On another occasion, the same man and his dog climbed into our four-wheel drive vehicle to set off on a journey through the bush. We had learned that *kapi palya* is translated as 'good' (i.e. drinkable) water, and were familiar with the Yankunytjatjara acceptance of obligation, *uwu, palya* ('yes, good'). Roz, my wife, patted the dog on the head and said '*papa palya*'. Paddy Uluru pursed his lips and corrected her: '*papa wiru* ['likeable dog']; *papa palya* got no teeth'. Thus, we began to intuit, *palya* is better equated with 'sweet' than 'good'. Derrida regarded language as a self-referential system in which words are defined only with reference to other words. During fieldwork, however, we interact with people in an environment that has meaning for them, to which they can point. Words are used to make ostensive references. Language is used to do practical things (cf. Sarup 1989: 59, 61). When someone says, 'That man is my father' (but genealogy shows him to be what we term an uncle) or when they say '*mangu* caused that granary to collapse' it is true that we, and those we work with, can only apprehend the man or fallen granary in terms of their respective meanings for us, yet at that moment the man and the granary form *in themselves* bridgeheads between otherwise closed worlds. Spoken words walk a tightrope between signification and reference. Carrithers has argued that human emotions provide a similar bridgehead. We can recognise that a Tikoepen is angry and upset, even though the reasons for his emotions may be peculiar to the construction of Tikoepen culture (Carrithers 1992).

Quine proposed a distinction between 'observation sentences' and 'theoretical sentences' (Quine 1960: 17). Like Frake's study of the Subanam classification of disease (chapter 3), many ethno-biological studies have been based on the access to culture provided by observation sentences, producing lists of indigenous names for animal and plant species, ecological zones and so forth (e.g. Williams and Baines 1993; Reid *et al.* 1993). Puttnam, however, questioned whether Quine's distinction could ever be complete (Puttnam 1995: 17, 61). In practice, even an object such as a rabbit is comprehended within a body of knowledge (Baker *et al.* 1993). We were once driving along a bush track in central Australia when two kangaroos bounded across the path. A Yankunytjatjara girl in the vehicle leapt to her feet shouting (in English), 'Look, Mummy, meat!' (Yankunytjatjara *kuka* can be translated as game animal, or meat.) On another occasion, when some Yankunytjatjara men were hunting rabbits, we encountered one which

refused to run away, yet could not be hit. After a few attempts, one said, 'Leave him, might be *mamu*', and we returned to the vehicle. This, and similar events, led me to infer that *mamu* are malevolent agencies which can possess both people and animals. Puttnam suggested that the problem with Quine's distinction was that a term like *bosorkanyok* might equally well mean 'ugly old woman with wart on nose', or 'witch'. The latter is embedded within a theory of being, the former apparently is not. I suggest that terms such as witch can be elucidated by describing the way in which objects and events are connected. 'Mamu cause animals to behave unnaturally'; 'a "witch" makes people ill by travelling at night as a white light'. Confronted with statements like this in the field, we realise how different the logical connections which people construct between referents may be. Yet, if representations are underdetermined by experience, we can only make the best match to constructs in our own culture – translation will inevitably be incomplete. The crux of the anthropological dilemma is the aptness of terms such as 'witch' or 'malevolent agency' (why not 'devil'?).

#### There is no ivory tower: the politics of writing

The term *fabrication* has two meanings. Steel boxes and buildings are fabricated, but so too are false alibis. A similar ambiguity is exploited in the idea of ethnography as fiction, associated with *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Contributors drew on Derrida's theory to challenge the transparency of ethnographic texts, highlighting ethnographers' use of various literary styles to argue that ethnography is something constructed by the writer.

The apparent naturalness of factual ethnography is usefully called into question by redefining it as a form of fiction, just as Derrida questioned the apparent transparency of speech by redefining it as a form of writing. Both reformulations highlight unexpected qualities of the seemingly natural categories (speech, description), but at the cost of importing inappropriate qualities of the seemingly artificial terms to which they are opposed (writing, fiction). As Eco wrote, 'Derrida – in order to stress non obvious truths – disregards very obvious truths that nobody can reasonably pass over in silence' (Eco 1990: 36). The process of mutual accommodation that occurs during the interpretation of meanings in the field ends once the ethnography is written, but the people described continue to exist.

Geertz was the first to put forward the idea of ethnography as fiction

when he said of his own writing that constructing actor-oriented descriptions of Berber chieftains, Jewish merchants and French soldiers in Morocco was not all that different to constructing novels about nineteenth-century life in provincial France (Geertz 1973a: 15). I argue, to the contrary, that by treating ethnography as a self-referential system, Geertz glosses over the crucial distinction between Madame Bovary's hypothetical trajectory through provincial French culture and the real (albeit recollected) trajectories of the characters in Geertz's own case study. Clifford justifies the concept of ethnography as fiction by recalling the definition of art as the fashioning of useful artefacts (Clifford 1986: 6), yet he concedes 'we cannot refer to Samoans as "Meadian" or call Tikopea a "Firthian" culture as freely as we speak of Dickensian or Flaubertian worlds' (Clifford 1986: 13). Unlike Oliver Twist and Fagin, the Samoans and Tikopeans exist independently of what is written about them, and the ethnography makes reference to their existence.

Foucault argues for the existence of a community of knowers who share a common 'discourse' and contends that, while such discourses radically influence the way we talk about the world, they can none the less be said to make reference to things that exist outside of the discourse (Foucault 1972 [1969]). Foucault therefore positions himself somewhere between complete relativity and absolute objectivity. Each discipline, in Foucault's assessment, is characterised by a particular way of writing (or speaking). A mathematician would not describe, within the body of his text on calculus, how an idea came to him as he prepared to leave his house, because expressions such as 'two quantities both equal to a third quantity are also equal to each other' are held to be true regardless of the circumstances in which the mathematician is writing. This is a premise of mathematical *discourse*. Disciplines such as natural science, psychiatry and economics each recognise certain 'objects' around which discourse takes place: natural selection, madness or the market. For Foucault, unlike Quine, there can be no pure 'observation sentences'. The rules of a discourse determine which statements about such 'objects' make sense and which are considered irrelevant, marginal or unscientific. Foucault's interest is in how such rules direct the course of debate. One might, for example, point to the way in which the discourse of the free market makes consumer choice an 'object' but, when talking of the 'consumer's right to choose', marginalises the effect of unequal ownership of the means of production

by refusing to concede its relevance. Foucault recognises that factors outside discourse can shape it. Such factors include the role of discourse in the decisions of government and in political struggles, and the appropriation of discourse by people who claim an exclusive right to use it. These external relations define a cultural space within which several possible discourses can be practised. Foucault is not himself interested in studying such a 'space' because this would 'neutralise' the internal relationships within a discourse by making them 'a sign of' (i.e. refer to) something else. It would be possible to discover what the term *neurosis refers to*, 'such a history of the referent would no doubt be possible' (Foucault 1972: 47), this is what makes Foucault less radical a Postmodernist than Derrida, but observation of the referent would not explain how, at a certain time, medical expertise was able to claim the authority to diagnose madness as a crime.

Gombrich's analysis of style and illusion in art made many of the points Foucault later made with regard to written discourse, yet highlights the referential quality of representational art. Gombrich argued that it makes no sense to try and interpret an artistic motif unless one has learnt how to classify and locate it within its stylistic tradition (Gombrich 1960: 63). Gombrich's concept of style corresponds quite closely to Foucault's concept of discourse. A 'correct' painting is not, for Gombrich, a faithful record of a visual experience but the faithful construction of a relational model (Gombrich 1960: 78); Foucault wrote similarly that 'a discourse is not a mere intersection of words and things, but a practice which systematically forms the objects of which it speaks' (Foucault 1972: 49). Whereas, however, Foucault put 'the history of the referent' to one side (Foucault 1972: 47), Gombrich was interested in how the artist solved the difficulty that 'the amount of information reaching us from the visible world is incalculably large, and the artist's medium is inevitably restricted and granular' (Gombrich 1960: 182). He concluded that it is not simply a matter of trying to supply as much visual information as possible, but rather that styles are devised to convey particular messages about the world: 'to say of a drawing that it is a correct view of Tivoli... means that those who understand the notation will derive *no false information* from the drawing' (Gombrich 1960: 78, his emphasis). A writer can no more be blamed for using a style than can an artist. Just as an artistic style tends to reduce the innumerable details of visual perception to regular forms, so written styles tend to reduce the richness of experience to

categorical distinctions. The question, 'Is this a correct view of the Nuer?' remains as valid as 'Is this a correct view of Tivoli?', and can only be answered with reference to the Nuer themselves.

Since, however, all styles are chosen for a purpose, it is also legitimate to ask whether the writer has been honest about their purpose. If theories, policies and emotions mediate knowledge, they should be made explicit. The 'trick' which Postmodernist critics have accurately identified is to make one's style look 'natural'. If naturalism is impossible, the writer should make his or her style apparent, just as the Postmodernist artist makes the paint visible on the canvas, rather than attempting to seduce the eye through the canvas to the world 'beyond'.

Evans-Pritchard's style of writing in *The Nuer* is guided by Radcliffe-Brown's theory of Structural Functionalism. Radcliffe-Brown contended that 'the actual relations of Tom, Dick and Harry may go down in our field notebooks... but what we need for scientific purposes is an account of the form of the structure' (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 192). The reasons why Radcliffe-Brown took this approach are outlined in chapter 2. They explain why Evans-Pritchard's ethnographic style leaves no room for the lively case studies that characterise the ethnography of Malinowski and Firth. As Rosaldo concedes, 'Evans-Pritchard's object of scientific knowledge is social structure rather than historical contingencies and political action' (Rosaldo 1986: 93). Classical ethnography sought to separate the writer from the people about whom (s)he was writing, to separate the subjective experiences of the anthropologist from the 'objective referent of the text'. Postmodernist ethnography puts the anthropologist back into the ethnographic account, 'situating' them in their text. This is a different style of ethnography and attention can usefully be drawn to the stylistic techniques used, as Crapanzano does in his analysis of texts by Catlin, Goethe and Geertz (Crapanzano 1986). Socioecology, by focusing on the cost and benefit to participants of the transactions in which they are immediately engaged, demands a more fine-grained account of social life than does Marxism, but at the cost of leaving the long-term consequences of shifts in the control of productive resources, highlighted by Marx, out of focus.

### Conclusion

Linnaeus believed species were little changed since their creation by God. Variation within a species was considered to be nothing more than evidence for the effect of soil and climate on a predetermined

'type': Darwin's theory of natural selection refocused scientists' attention on variation within populations. Variation now provided crucial evidence for the almost imperceptibly slow process which led to the origin of new species. The two theories could be said to demand different styles of writing, but each continues to be useful in the biological sciences. In the same way, theories in the social sciences demand a style of writing appropriate to the particular perspective they bring to bear on the complexity of social life, and more than one theory may be useful to the analyst. Sometimes one theory provides a more detailed insight into phenomena previously studied according to an earlier theory. Socioecology and Marxism both extended the insights provided by Functionalism, while interpretive sociology has provided a more fine-grained understanding of the processes by which meaning is constructed than did Structuralism. At other times, theories lead to conflicting conclusions, as seems to be the case with Structuralism and Socioecology.

While it seems inadequate to dismiss the Linnaean approach as nothing more than an exercise in political domination, it has an inescapable political dimension. His classification remains invaluable as a means of studying biological variation at any moment in time, yet the view that human populations are a manifestation of a given 'type' also justifies racism. The same distinction can be made with regard to Functionalism or Socioecology. Any theory that is capable of practical application will have political implications and we must be conscious of the practical consequences of choosing to use particular theories.

In his contribution to *Writing Culture*, Stephen Tylor claims that science sought to present perception unmediated by concepts and failed, because such a goal was unattainable (Tylor 1986: 123). Tylor follows Derrida in arguing that writing can only be self-referential (Tylor 1986: 138-9). He concludes that Postmodern ethnography can take any form, because 'every attempt will be incomplete' (Tylor 1986: 136). This is a counsel of despair. It does not follow that theories are necessarily nothing but political ideologies (see Layton 1989b). Style is used to depict material brought into focus by theory and theories make reference to a world of objects. As Carrithers has pointed out, the Postmodernist attack on science depends upon an impoverished notion of how science is practised (Carrithers 1992: 152-4). Even paragons of the Enlightenment were aware that our perception of the world is mediated by our theories. Richard Watson has shown that

seventeenth-century scientists also regarded the results of their experiments as 'provisional knowledge' and debated scientific method with sceptics who contended that 'it is impossible to know whether representations and interpretations of the world are true or even whether there is a world outside sensory impressions and imaginations at all' (Watson 1991: 275; cf. Gower 1997). Watson argues that one need only look at the practical results of taking science seriously to see that it has become increasingly effective. While this partly answers the Postmodern criticism, it does not address the question of how we decide on the criteria by which such judgements will be made.

Anthropological translation of indigenous ideas confronts the same problem. If representations are under-determined by experience, no complete translation will ever be possible. The best the anthropologist can do is to match indigenous ideas as closely as possible to constructs in his or her own culture. This is why Malinowski compared *kula* values to the crown jewels and to sporting trophies, despite noting that neither parallel was exact. But why does the anthropologist choose one translation rather than another? Ethnography has usually been written by the dominant about the weak, and the practice of translation confers power. When the anthropologist chooses what to render meaningful or rational about another culture, (s)he is using that power. If Quine was right to claim that experience is never sufficient to determine which of countless alternative theories is correct, on what grounds do we favour one theory over another?

Belief in witchcraft does not prevent the Azande from discovering that to make pots successfully you must get rid of stones and air bubbles in the clay. The Azande utilise at least two theories of causality, enabling them to debate whether bad workmanship or witchcraft has caused a run of breakages during successive firings. When he was in the field Evans-Pritchard found it most convenient to assume witches existed and organise his daily life accordingly. The problem he encountered once he began to write his ethnography was that Azande 'witchcraft' explains what members of Evans-Pritchard's scientific subculture regard as bad luck. He therefore chose to translate it in terms of a discredited, historically situated theory of causality. In retrospect the political dimension of his translation is evident. If he had translated the 'witch-doctor's seance' as psychotherapy, we would evaluate the Azande differently.

Now the weak have made their own voice heard, what justification is

there for the anthropologist's practice of translating culture (Clifford 1986: 8–10)? How would the Azande write a comparative anthropology? Would they assess the degree to which a society had developed according to its ability to recognise witchcraft? Worth and Adair's work with Navaho film-makers suggests how unexpectedly the Navaho might write their own ethnographic narratives (Worth and Adair 1972). Henry Reynolds has reconstructed the way in which indigenous Australians interpreted the first European colonists they encountered. Reynolds shows how they found it incredible that settlers should hoard great quantities of tobacco, livestock etc. which they could not possibly need in the next few days (Reynolds 1982: 68). What extraordinary greed and meanness prevented them from distributing these goods so that they could enter into social relationships with indigenous people? Reynolds cites the case of an Aboriginal party who killed a bullock and offered the kidney fat to the frightened white owner, saying 'they were not like the whites themselves – greedy'. Women were regarded by Aboriginal men as an important political resource: bestowing women in marriage was probably the principal source of secular power (Reynolds 1982: 70). White pioneers, in an area bereft of white women, often took advantages of offers of Aboriginal women, failing to realise that in doing so the Aborigines were offering them the opportunity to enter into a web of reciprocal obligations and instead construing it as a market transaction, prostitution. Records show that the women were frequently soon turned out without even the meagre payments of food, clothing or axes that had originally been promised. Such behaviour was justified at the time in terms of the current Spencerian scientific orthodoxy that indigenous Australians were survivors of an early stage in human evolution and doomed to die out in the face of a superior race; that they were irrational in their thought and, as hunter-gatherers, innocent of any concept of rights over property. Does the use of Socioecological theory do equal injustice to Aboriginal society?

While the political implications of Spencer's theory provide adequate grounds for questioning it, there are further reasons why it now seems unsatisfactory. As anthropological theories have multiplied over time, we can see how each brings a different focus to bear on our experiences in the field. Theories developed since Spencer's time put our own prior assumptions about human nature more thoroughly into question, and give us a more fine-grained vision of the processes of social life.

It also becomes possible to see that ethnography, or writing about

peoples, is impossible without some theory to guide our choice of events to describe, and the style by which we represent those events. Theories are not neutral. They are chosen for a purpose, to draw our own attention, and that of our readers, to aspects of social life and to propose causal connections between events. While our desire may simply be to give as complete an account as we can of social life, we write with a purpose that, to a greater or lesser extent, stems from the problems of our own time and place, our own lived experience. We must never forget that what we write may guide or justify others' actions in future. Theory is inextricably bound up with politics. The better we understand the role of theory in anthropology, the better we appreciate both its dangers and its usefulness.