Situatedness of anth - p. 191 Layton

Introduction

I left Chicago two days after the assassination of Robert Kennedy. My apartment in Chicago was practically bare. I had finished packing and had sold most of my furniture, leaving only the bed and a coffeepot. I had been mildly anxious about leaving, but the news of the murder had buried those feelings under a wave of revulsion and disgust. I left America with a sense of giddy release. I was sick of being a student, tired of the city, and felt politically impotent. I was going to Morocco to become an anthropologist.

I arrived in Paris in June of 1968, several days after police had cleared the last students from the faculty of medicine. In the wake of the uprising I found the streets nearly empty, and ripped-up walls covered with political graffiti. I attended several meetings in the courtyard of the Sorbonne, but it was too late, the revolutionary momentum had crested. Leaflets urged people not to leave Paris for their vacations. The capital was empty, broken, worn. I met a girl—part Indian, she said—who was running away from her home in Arizona. As we wandered by the Seine, the war-like atmosphere and uncertain future made me feel like a character in one of Sartre's novels, very existential. Two days later I had my hair cut, took the bus to Orly, and left for Morocco.

In the early 1960s the great Hutchins experiment in general education was in its last stages at the University of Chicago. Knowing that liberal education in its "classic" sense was dying out moved me deeply. The college had offered me the profound and liberating experience of discovering what thinking is really about, but it had also left me with a sense of crisis about the older sciences and disciplines. For most of us, it was slowly becoming clear that American society was beset with profound structural problems, and that the illumination and coherence necessary to overcome them would not be found in the academy or in existing political institutions. This left many of us searching and confused, but still relatively passive. The troubles ran deep, but Chicago was serene on the surface.

Perhaps the two books which expressed the ethos of that time most fully for me were Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) and Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* (1955). Kuhn had clearly isolated a set of concerns which extended beyond physics and chemistry. His term "paradigm exhaustion" symbolized the failure of conventional thinking to explain the common theme in our dissatisfactions with the academic curriculum, politics, and personal experience. Somehow, the received truths offered to us were not sufficient to organize our perceptions and experiences; something new must lie ahead.

My attraction to Lévi-Strauss's concept of *dépaysement* separated me from many of my friends, who were more enticed by the emerging varieties of social and political praxis. The Frenchman's paradoxical call for a distancing that would allow one to return more profoundly home was compelling, if obscure. I was weary of the West, without knowing why, and was seduced by the simplistic view that Western culture was only one among many, and not the most "interesting" one at that.

This undergraduate ennui plus my fervent intellectual bent had drawn me to anthropology. It seemed to be the only academic discipline where, by definition, one had to get out of the library and away from other academics. Its scope was truly preposterous, literally anything from lemur feet to shadow plays; as one professor put it, it was "the dilettante's discipline."

In the graduate anthropology department at the University of Chicago, the world was divided into two categories of people: those who had done fieldwork, and those who had not; the latter were not "really" anthropologists, regardless of what they knew about anthropological topics. Professor Mircea Eliade, for example, was a man of great erudition in the field of comparative religion, and was respected for his encyclopedic learning, but it was repeatedly stressed that he was not an anthropologist: his intuition had not been altered by the alchemy of fieldwork.

I was told that my papers did not really count because once I had done fieldwork they would be radically different. Knowing smiles greeted the acerbic remarks which graduate students made about the lack of theory in certain of the classics we studied; never mind, we were told, the authors were great fieldworkers. At the time, this intrigued me. The promise of initiation into the clan secrets was seductive. I fully accepted the dogma.

Yet I knew of no book which made a serious intellectual effort to define this essential rite of passage, this metaphysical marker which separated anthropologists from the rest. Undoubtedly the one great exception to this intriguing rule was Lévi-Strauss' masterpiece, *Tristes Tropiques*. Still, as everyone knew, Lévi-Strauss was not a good fieldworker. The book was treated by anthropologists either as a fine piece of French literature or, snidely and true to form, as an overcompensation for the author's shortcomings in the bush.

I have asked leading anthropologists who espouse this "before and after" view of fieldwork why they have not written on the subject themselves, since it seems to be such an important one for the field. The response I received was culturally standardized: "Yes, I suppose, I thought about it when I was young. I kept diaries, perhaps someday, but you know there are really other things which are more important."

This book is an account of my experiences in Morocco; it is also an essay about anthropology. I have tried to break through the double-bind which has defined anthropology in the past. As graduate students we are told that "anthropology equals experience"; you are not an anthropologist until you have the experience of doing it. But when one returns from the field, the opposite immediately applies: anthropology is not the experiences which made you an initiate, but only the objective data you have brought back.

One can let off steam by writing memoirs or anecdotal accounts of sufferings, but under no circumstances is there any direct relation between field

activity and the theories which lie at the core of the discipline. In recent years there has been a minor flurry of books dealing with the question of participant observation. These books have varied a great deal in keenness of perception and grace of style, but they all cling to the key assumption that the field experience itself is basically separable from the mainstream of theory in anthropology—that the enterprise of inquiry is essentially discontinuous from its results.

At the risk of violating the clan taboos, I argue that all cultural activity is experiential, that fieldwork is a distinctive type of cultural activity, and that it is this activity which defines the discipline. But what should therefore be the very strength of anthropology—its experiential, reflective, and critical activity—has been eliminated as a valid area of inquiry by an attachment to a positivistic view of science, which I find radically inappropriate in a field which claims to study humanity.

The problem of the book is a hermeneutical one, and the method I employ is a modified phenomenological one. I have striven to keep the use of technical terms and jargon to an absolute minimum, but it seems only fair to give some signposts for the path I have attempted to travel. Thus, following Paul Ricoeur, I define the problem of hermeneutics (which is simply Greek for "interpretation") as "the comprehension of self by the detour of the comprehension of the other."* It is vital to stress that this is not psychology of any sort, despite the definite

*Paul Ricouer, "Existence et hermeneutique," p. 20, in *Le Conflit des Interpretations* (Editions Du Seuil, Paris, 1969).

psychological overtones in certain passages. The self being discussed is perfectly public, it is neither the purely cerebral cogito of the Cartesians, nor the deep psychological self of the Freudians. Rather it is the culturally mediated and historically situated self which finds itself in a continuously changing world of meaning.

For that reason I employ a phenomenological method. Ricoeur again offers us a clear definition. Phenomenology for him is a description of "a movement in which each cultural figure finds its meaning not in what precedes it but in what follows: consciousness is drawn out of itself and ahead of itself in a process in which each step is abolished and retained in the following one."* In simpler language, this means that what you will read in this book is meant to be a whole, in which the meaning of each chapter depends on what comes after it. What the book and these experiences are about is themselves.

The book is a reconstruction of a set of encounters that occurred while doing fieldwork. At that time, of course, things were anything but neat and coherent. At this time, I have made them seem that way so as to salvage some meaning from that period for myself and for others. This book is a studied condensation of a swirl of people, places, and feelings. It could have been half as long, or twice as long, or ten times as long. Some informants with whom I worked are not mentioned, some are collapsed into the figures presented here, and others are left out altogether. Anyone who had such a set of progressively coherent

**Ibid.*, p. 25.

encounters while in the field, and was fully conscious of it at the time, would not have the kind of experience which I have reconstructed here. As Hegel says, "the owl of Minerva flies at Dusk."

What follows is an account, reconstructed five years later and again two years after that, of my fieldwork experience in Morocco during 1968 and 1969. I worked in Morocco under the guidance of my advisor, Clifford Geertz, who, along with his wife Hildred and two other young anthropologists, was studying a walled oasis market town, Sefrou. My task was to work in the tribal areas surrounding Sefrou in the Middle Atlas Mountains of Morocco.*

*For a complementary and more traditionally anthropological treatment of the data covered here, see my *Symbolic Domination: Cultural Form and Historical Change in Morocco* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1975).

Conclusion

Culture is interpretation. The 'facts' of anthropology, the material which the anthropologist has gone to the field to find, are already themselves interpretations. The baseline data is already culturally mediated by the people whose culture we, as anthropologists, have come to explore. Facts are made—the word comes from the Latin *factum*, "made"—and the facts we interpret are made and remade. Therefore they cannot be collected as if they were rocks, picked up and put into cartons and shipped home to be analyzed in the laboratory.

Culture in all of its manifestations is overdetermined. It does not present itself neutrally or with one voice. Every cultural fact can be interpreted in many ways, both by the anthropologist and by his subjects. The scientific revolutions which established these parameters at the turn of the current century have been largely ignored in anthropology. Frederic Jameson's reference to the paradigm shift in linguistics applies to anthropology as well. He notes "a movement from a substantive way of thinking to a relational one. . . . Difficulties arose from terms which tried to name substances or objects . . . while linguistics was a science characterized by the absence of such substances. . . . There are first of all

points of view . . . with whose help you then subsequently create your objects."*

The fact that all cultural facts are interpretations, and multivocal ones at that, is true both for the anthropologist and for his informant, the Other with whom he works. His informant—and the word is accurate—must interpret his own culture and that of the anthropologist. The same holds for the anthropologist. Both live in rich, partially integrated, ongoing life worlds. They are, however, not the same. Nor is there any mechanical and easy means of translation from one set of experiences to the other. That problem and the process of translation, therefore, become one of the central arts and crucial tasks of fieldwork. It should be clear that the view of the "primitive" as a creature living by rigid rules, in total harmony with his environment, and essentially not cursed with a glimmer of self-consciousness, is a set of complex cultural projections. There is no "primitive." There are other men, living other lives.

Anthropology is an interpretive science. Its object of study, humanity encountered as Other, is on the same epistemological level as it is. Both the anthropologist and his informants live in a culturally mediated world, caught up in "webs of signification" they themselves have spun. This is the ground of anthropology; there is no privileged position, no absolute perspective, and no valid way to eliminate consciousness from our activities or those of others.

*Frederic Jameson, *The Prison House of Language* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1972), p. 13.

jective, between subjects. At best, it is partial and thin. The depth and scope of the culture that has been constructed is often woefully inadequate when measured against people interacting and carrying on their daily rounds in the everyday world. Anthropology is not a set of questionnaires which are handed over, filled out, and handed back. Most of the anthropologist's time is spent sitting around waiting for informants, doing errands, drinking tea, taking genealogies, mediating fights, being pestered for rides, and vainly attempting small talk—all in someone else's culture. The inadequacy of one's comprehension is incessantly brought to the surface and publicly displayed.

Interruptions and eruptions mock the fieldworker and his inquiry; more accurately, they may be said to inform his inquiry, to be an essential part of it. The constant breakdown, it seems to me, is not just an annoying accident but a core aspect of this type of inquiry. Later I became increasingly aware that these ruptures of communication were highly revealing, and often proved to be turning points. At the time, however, they seemed only to represent our frustration. Etymology comes to the rescue again: *e-ruption*, a breaking out, and *inter-ruption*, a breaking in, of this liminal culture through which we were trying to communicate.

Whenever these breaks occurred—and I have described several of the most important ones earlier—the cycle began again. This cross-cultural communication and interaction all took on a new content, often a new depth. The groundwork we had laid often seemed to fall away from under us and we

scrambled somewhere else. More had been incorporated, more could be taken for granted, more could be shared. This is a moving ratio and one which never reaches identity, far from it. But there is movement, there is change, there is informing.

Fieldwork, then, is a process of intersubjective construction of liminal modes of communication. Intersubjective means literally more than one subject, but being situated neither quite here nor quite there, the subjects involved do not share a common set of assumptions, experiences, or traditions. Their construction is a public process. Most of this book has focused on these objects which my Moroccan friends and I constructed between us, over time, in order to communicate. That the communication was often painstaking and partial is a central theme. That it was not totally opaque is an equally important theme. It is the dialectic between these poles, ever repeated, never quite the same, which constitutes fieldwork.

Summing up, then, we can say the following.

The first person with whom I had any sustained contact was the Frenchman Maurice Richard. Staying at his hotel was an obligatory first step for Europeans entering into Sefrou (although recently the Moroccan government has opened a luxury hotel). Knowing that his clientele will not be with him long, Richard has developed a persona of cheerful good will, which becomes less and less convincing as he becomes more isolated. The contact with Richard was immediate. There was no language barrier. He was eager to talk. Being an outsider to all of the

other Sefrou groups, he had interesting stereotypes of each, which he was more than willing to exchange for a receptive smile. His very accessibility, however, was also revealing of his limitations. He provided entry only to the past, to the last days of colonialism. He was located on the very edge of Sefrou society, its most external point. His corner was easily accessible, but it revealed only the fringes of Moroccan society. Although this subject provided ample material for an inquiry, and was in fact in the process of disappearing forever, my project led me in other directions.

Ibrahim was on the other side of the buffer zone between the French and the Moroccan societies. He had matured during the waning days of the Protectorate and made his career by artfully straddling the line between communities without any confusion as to which side of the line he was on. His speciality was presenting goods and services for external consumption. They were carefully packaged. He was a guide along the main thoroughfares of Sefrou society. His tour was quite helpful for understanding the Ville Nouvelle, but his aid stopped at the walls of the medina. Despite his caution, the first breakthroughs of Otherness occurred with Ibrahim. This professional of the external was, nonetheless, a Moroccan.

My guide through the medina of Sefrou and the transitional zones of Moroccan culture was Ali. My contact with him was the first major step toward a more intimate relationship with Sefrou. He was a floating figure within his own society, living a hand-to-mouth existence in the city. He was a patient, curious, highly imaginative, adventurous, sensuous, and relentlessly perceptive person. My orientation to Moroccan culture as immediacy, as lived experience, came from my friendship with Ali. He had rejected a certain way of life, but not other Moroccan alternatives. He was ascerbic and direct in his criticisms of village ways, but they were insider's jibes.

Ali was also limited by his strengths. Because of his demeanor and antagonism he had almost become an outcast in the village. The insights and orientations which he continued to provide for me throughout the field experience were invaluable. He knowingly and adroitly used the villagers' inhibitions and vulnerabilities against them. Ali was an insider's outsider. His unique vantage point and provocative attitude periodically rescued me from impasses and collective resistance. Ali was, however, now outside village affairs, basically out of touch. He provided little help on the day-to-day level, but could be relied on for vital aid.

So, just as Richard was situated between the two French communities, and Ibrahim between the French and local Moroccan Ville Nouvelle groups, so Ali was situated between the floating population of the medina and his natal village of saint's descendants. All were marginal, all provided help in making transitions from group to group, site to site.

Within Sidi Lahcen itself, the situation became more tightly controlled. The community tacitly (and in some cases explicitly) attempted to situate the anthropologist and thereby control him. The first two young men with whom I worked exemplify

this. Mekki, my first informant, literally pushed on me by the villagers, was from Ali's sub-lineage. Not being burdened with family or work obligations, he eagerly sought what to others was a mixed blessing. Unfortunately, he lacked both intelligence and the imaginative ability to objectify his own life-world and then present it to a foreigner. This was an insurmountable handicap. Rashid, my second informant, was everything that Mekki was not; that was his problem. He was imaginative, energetic, curious, intelligent, and was floating, like Ali, except that Rashid's experience was essentially limited to village life. He could have been and was (from time to time) an extremely important informant. But, again like Ali, he aroused strong community disapproval. Rashid's tongue was feared. Everyone, including his father, sought to silence him. Unsure about my presence in the village, they wanted some control over the information I was receiving. Rashid knew a great deal and was eager to convey it. As the Moroccan proverb goes, Those who have no shame, do as they please. And so those with no internal sense of appropriate behavior must be controlled by force. Rashid, unlike Ali, had no power base, no alternative cards to play. In general, he was forced to accede to the community's injunctions, yet he enjoyed violating them whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Malik offered an excellent compromise, both for me and for the community. I had forced my way into Sidi Lahcen, after all, and the villagers feared that ultimately I had come to subvert their religion.

Therefore, it was appropriate that the man who became my central informant was situated on the edge of the most respected of the saintly sub-lineages. This group had a very high rate of endogamous marriage. Malik's father, however, had married a woman not only from outside the sub-lineage but from outside the village. Consequently, as closely attached to this core group as he was emotionally, he was structurally somewhat on its edge, and he overcompensated for it.

He was the perfect representative of orthodoxy. He was proud of his tradition but he had failed to find a traditional role for himself. Impatient with the position of *fqi*, he was stymied in pursuing his own grandiose self-image. A conservative, he lacked institutions to defend. He proved to be the perfect community choice. The elders of his sub-lineage sanctioned his involvement and so did Sergeant Larawi, the most powerful man in the village. They knew they could trust Malik.

Malik, like Ibrahim, was self-controlled, orderly, and reserved. But unlike Ibrahim, he had not made a career of external relations. Malik had remained within the rural world. Malik would have liked to be the internal counterpart of Ibrahim. But no such role existed. He had to improvise as he went along. His "impression management," however, was in constant tension with the inputs of Ali, Rashid, and others. Malik attempted to steer cautiously around sensitive areas. Once challenged, he would yield, but after the early going, he would rarely initiate. As we proceeded, Malik became more dependent on

The fqi *takes it easy.*

Ben Mohammed: "a wish for friendship may arise quickly but friendship does not"

me than I was on him. This helps explain his lack of sustained resistance on sensitive areas; Ibrahim, no doubt, would not have backed down so readily.

Many of the political dimensions of the informant relationship were obviated by Driss ben Mohammed's steadfast adherence to the role of host. This eventually established the grounds for a dialogue. Ben Mohammed was internal to the Moroccan tradition. He looked back to his forefather, the seventeenth-century saint, for guidance in the modern world. He maintained a belief in the ultimate and unconditional superiority of Islam.

This absolute difference which separated us was openly acknowledged only at the end of my stay. We had become friends, we had shown each other mutual respect and trust. The limits of the situation were not obscured for either of us. I was for him a rich member of a dominant civilization about which he had the profoundest reservations. To me, he was struggling to revive a cultural universe which I no longer inhabited and could not ultimately support. But our friendship tempered our differences. Here we had come full circle. There were now two subjects facing each other. Each was the product of an historical tradition which situated and conditioned him. Each was aware of a profound crisis within that tradition but still looked back to it for renewal and solace. We were profoundly Other to each other.

That I would journey to Morocco to confront Otherness and myself was typical of my culture (or the parts of it I could accept). That ben Mohammed would enter into this sort of dialogue without self-denigration was impressive. My restless and scien-

tifically cloaked wanderings brought me to this mountain village in Morocco. Ben Mohammed sought the wisdom of the reformist saint, yet was willing, even eager, to tell me about him. Through mutual confrontation of our own situations we did establish contact. But this also highlighted our fundamental Otherness. What separated us was fundamentally our past. I could understand ben Mohammed only to the extent that he could understand me—that is to say, partially. He did not live in a crystalline world of immutable Otherness any more than I did. He grew up in an historical situation which provided him with meaningful but only partially satisfactory interpretations of his world, as did I. Our Otherness was not an ineffable essence, but rather the sum of different historical experiences. Different webs of signification separated us, but these webs were now at least partially intertwined. But a dialogue was only possible when we recognized our differences, when we remained critically loyal to the symbols which our traditions had given us. By so doing, we began a process of change.

Afterword

To take as one's object the study of the object, tearing oneself away from the alternative of a more or less novelistic evocation of an enchanted experience and demolishing the phantasms of exoticism, whose paradigm remains *L'Afrique fantôme,* with its Céline-esque accents; to operate this turning of the interpreter back toward himself and toward interpretation—this is to render fieldwork, often constructed as an initiation rite surrounded by secrets and mysteries, its proper dimension: a work of construction of a representation of social reality. This turning to the self, in its apparent narcissism, is itself a break with the self-complacency of literary evocation, and, far from resulting in an intimate confession, it leads instead to an objectification of the knowing subject. But it marks another, more decisive break with the positivist conception of scientific work, with its exaltation of "naive" observation and its innocent confidence in what Nietzsche called the "dogma of immaculate conception," the foundation point of a science without scientists, one which reduces the knowing subject to a registering device. It constitutes yet another break, no doubt psychologically the most difficult, with that brand of "refurbished positivism" that Clifford Geertz presents, with all the myriad seductions of