ANTHROPOLOGY
AND THE
WILL TO MEANING
A Postcolonial Critique

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For Michael Herzfeld
με αγάπη και εκτίμηση
1 INTRODUCTION: OF SCHOLARS, GAMBLERS AND THIEVES

This book is about the impossible, if not the impossible in general – for that would be the domain of philosophers – that version of the impossible which manifests itself in ethnological belief and practice. My aim is not merely to designate what this particular impossible is, to provide an account as to why it is impossible, or to outline the different ways in which the discipline and its practitioners have come up against it time and again. It is also, more importantly, to examine why ethnographers should want to imagine, desire and strive to demonstrate the impossible to begin with; and to explain – contrary to those who foresee, foretell or call for an end to anthropology, as the case might be – why ethnographers, having repeatedly grappled with the impossible and failed, must nonetheless persist in their efforts to win a battle that is always already lost.

In ethnological belief and practice, the impossible is the tenet of Sameness. It should not be assumed however that this notion refers to any sort of cultural universalism. On the contrary, Sameness is said to manifest itself, paradoxically enough, in the very cultural diversity that the discipline applauds and celebrates. It refers to the ultimately unworkable idea that despite, or perhaps because of their differences, all societies embody the Same cultural value and worth. It is, in short, the reverse of what ethnographers strive to refute – racism and ethnocentrism.

To say that Sameness is impossible is not to say that it is nothing. Indeed, my intention is not to doubt the existence of the phenomenon. Not only do ethnographers imagine and desire Sameness but they also posit it as the only ‘real’ reality. As I will argue in this study however, although not nothing, Sameness can never manifest itself in the world. Indeed, every attempt to demonstrate that this elusive social condition exists and is real does nothing more than to reproduce its contrary, namely, Otherness, which is to say, difference understood as cultural inferiority. That this is the case should be readily apparent if not on theoretical grounds – about which I shall have more to say in subsequent chapters – certainly in terms of the ethnographer’s own historical experience. The discourse that more than any other makes it its business to demonstrate and uphold Sameness is ethnological discourse. If the history of the discipline is anything to go by however, there is not a single ethnological paradigm – whether evolutionism, functionalism,
structuralism or culturalism, to name only the major ones – that has not been criticised for dividing the world between West and Other, superior and inferior. There is not even one that has not been found guilty of the ultimate ethnological transgression – ethnocentrism.

Such is the ethnological predicament. It is the unhappy, no doubt, predicament of the ethnographer who struggles (and must struggle) to redeem Otherness only to reproduce it, inadvertently but inevitably, further down the road, time and again. It is a predicament not only because Sameness is impossible but also because the ethnological struggle to attain the unattainable must continue unabated. Ethnographers must persist in their efforts to win a battle always already lost because the alternative would mean nothing less than having to acknowledge the reality of what stands in opposition to Sameness – racism and ethnocentrism. This is not to acknowledge that such profanities exist in the world. It is rather having to recognise that racism and ethnocentrism may be intrinsic to social reality, inescapable facts of the world. Although it is theoretically possible for ethnographers to abandon the tenet of Sameness, in practice, and in the absence of an alternative ethical mythology, it would mean nothing less than having to bear the full weight of the world. It would mean having to deal with the crushing realisation that the world is intrinsically ethically arbitrary, absurd and meaningless.

Yet if Sameness is indeed impossible and at the same time an indispensable ethical myth, something for the ethnographer to hold on to in the void, the ethnological predicament becomes as much, indeed more of a predicament for those on whose behalf the ethnographer’s redemptive struggle is undertaken and carried out. For it is they who are always at the receiving end of the ethnographer’s discourse, they who must bear the burden of Otherness that the ethnographer’s discourse reproduces. What, then, can these Others do to defend themselves against anthropology’s humanistic assault? How, in particular, should that Other of sorts, the native who has chosen to become an ethnographer, respond to the discipline’s moralising and to the demoralising that it causes? What must I do to keep at bay those whose ambition in life is to save me? How to free myself from a discursive practice which is as obsessed with liberating me as incapable of ever succeeding? In broader terms still, how can I deal with that which everyone born to the Other side of the divide must inevitably, sooner or later, in one way or another confront – Western hegemony? What am I to do to defend myself against the symbolic violence exercised over me by Western definitions of the world, whether these are humanistic and progressive, enlightened and tolerant or otherwise?

The native who has chosen to become an ethnographer is not alone in raising such questions. Nor is he alone in the discursive struggle whose aim is to decentre the West and to open up space for Other ways of thinking and being in the world. There are many others, the Western post-structuralists to begin with, who have opened the way and are leading this struggle –
uncompromising, subversive, vociferously deconstructive; and the post-colonial scholars themselves, in close proximity, in tune and in line with the post-structuralist deconstructive impulses – those ‘subaltern’ voices that can now speak, are being heard and taken seriously. It would seem, then, that help is close at hand. There is an immense body of critical work to draw from both for inspiration and in terms of choosing the most effective tactics and strategies. What is not at all clear is how far post-structuralists and post-colonial scholars are prepared to go, how far they can go and whether ‘far’ is far enough.

Let me turn first to poststructuralist anthropology. I shall not concern myself with the debate between it and the modernists which, like any other such debate, takes for granted what needs to be questioned and examined in detail. Rather, I shall begin by stating the obvious and in doing so expose both the limits and limitations of so-called ‘postmodern anthropology’ – what I shall call in this study, for reasons that will soon become apparent, heterodox discourse. The obvious, which is at the same time the best-guarded secret in the discipline, is that there has never been a crisis in ethnological representation, as heterodox ethnographers claim. No such crisis has ever befallen the discipline because the most fundamental ethnological representation – the representation without which there would be no anthropology – is questioned by no one, not least by the heterodox ethnographers themselves. This representation is none other than Sameness. Why this grand but obviously facile claim then?

What is at stake in the heterodox critique of ethnological representation is Sameness itself. Much like any other ethnological paradigm, heterodox discourse strives to uphold Sameness in the face of all those representations of Otherness that contradict and undermine it. Among such representations, not as prominent perhaps, but, for a discipline that makes it its business to uphold Sameness, far more poignant than any which come from outside, are ethnological representations. Hence the cumbersome (because contradictory) epistemological critique and the related argument that ethnological representations are ‘fictions’ and ‘partial truths’. This, of course, is not to say all ethnological representations. It is to say, rather, all, except one: Sameness. But heterodox ethnographers cannot say this. If they did, they would come face to face with the dreaded question as to why Sameness is excluded from the epistemological critique, why it is not itself fiction and a partial truth. Heterodox ethnographers must therefore remain silent and pretend that there is no contradiction to be dealt with. And the rest of the discipline must go along with the entire charade and pretend to take the heterodox argument seriously – so seriously as to either applaud it or level against it irrelevant criticisms (that it undermines anthropology’s scientific status, for instance). Everyone must pretend not to notice what is glaringly obvious. And with good reason. The aim of the discipline, after all, is to uphold Sameness, not to undermine it from within.
Yet the problem – which is both a problem of logical consistency and, more importantly, the problem of Otherness itself – is not resolved by hiding behind Sameness or by hiding Sameness behind facile epistemological arguments. What needs to be explained is not why ethnological representations are fictions and partial truths but rather how, armed as they are with what they posit as the most fundamental truth about Others, ethnographers end up reproducing its contrary. It is understandable that ethnographers – the true natives of anthropology – are not prepared to even raise such a question, let alone address it. As I have already suggested and will discuss in greater detail in subsequent chapters, Sameness is what ethnographers use to hold on to in the void, both sacred and taboo. Yet for those whom anthropology has long turned into natives there can be nothing sacred that crosses the divide. Sameness is a Western ethical myth for ethnological and popular consumption in a social universe where religious myths of the same order have lost their appeal. I – and I do not mean the person but the persona that exists under conditions of Western domination – do not need to treat it as the sacred even if for me, too, it appears as such. I must commit the sacrilege that ethnographers do not dare commit. I have no option but to demythologise it. This is not an easy task undertaken with relish. Western hegemony means being under the spell of Western ideas that appear to the dominated just as rational, meaningful and necessary as they appear to the dominant. The struggle against Western hegemony is a painful process because it is as much a struggle against one’s (colonised) self.

I turn to the task of demythologising Sameness in subsequent chapters. For now enough has been said to show that there is nothing in ethnological post-structuralism that can be of use in my own redemptive struggle. If anything, heterodox discourse emerges as an obstacle that stands in my way and has to be removed. But perhaps not everything is lost yet, perhaps help is still close at hand in the form of postcolonial discourse. It is not possible to summarise here such an enormous body of work in a way that does it justice. I shall focus instead on a recent paradigmatic example of postcolonial scholarship, a work whose intentions and strategies are central to the postcolonial project, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2000) attempt to ‘provincialize Europe’.

Despite the grand title – Provincializing Europe – the scope of Chakrabarty’s book is rather limited. His aim is to repudiate historicism, the idea of a universal human history in which non-Western societies appear to be following in the footsteps of the West – a project, one might add, that has been central in all twentieth-century anthropology. Chakrabarty, then, is not about to mount a comprehensive critique of the West. His project, he is quick to point out, ‘does not call for a simplistic, out of hand rejection of modernity, liberal values, universals, science, [or] reason ... ’ (2000: 42). On the contrary, as he points out throughout the book and summarises admirably at the end, ‘European thought is a gift to us all [non-Europeans]’ (2000: 255). It is a gift, Chakrabarty argues, because European thought
taught us non-Europeans the values of social justice and equality, even if, as historicism makes abundantly clear, it has never applied these values to the non-West.

The West has always been in the business of teaching the rest of the world values and culture. Is it really necessary to remind Chakrabarty that this ‘civilising’ mission is otherwise known as the white man’s burden? Is it necessary to remind him too that in India certain gifts can be poisonous (Parry 1989) or, in broader terms still, that as Derrida (1992) argues – whom Chakrabarty quotes approvingly – the gift as such is impossible, that it can become a debt and create relations of dependence? It would seem that what may be ‘simplistic’ is not rejection but rather unthinking acceptance of Western gifts. Indeed, because Chakrabarty and other postcolonial scholars have unthinkingly accepted the ‘gifts’ borne by the West, their discourse cannot be anything other than a dependent discourse – dependent for authorisation on the powers that be, namely, Western scholars.

Chakrabarty writes subaltern histories and believes that by doing so he can demonstrate the limits of historical thinking and hence make room for Other ways of thinking and being in the world. His point is that history ‘is only one among ways of remembering the past’ (2000:106) and that the present should be understood as a ‘plurality ... lack of totality ... constant fragmentariness’ (p. 243), ‘as irreducibly not-one’ (p. 249). In other words, it should be understood in multi-temporal terms, as a universe that consists of different times (or ways of being) which are irreducible to one another. No doubt, there are Other ways of remembering the past, myth being a paradigmatic example. The question, however, is whether the existence of myth in and of itself can automatically demonstrate the limits of historical thinking. Social justice and equality, which Chakrabarty holds so dear, are also one among other ways of being in the world. If Chakrabarty is not prepared to acknowledge that humanism is limited because of the existence of non-humanism, why should historians acknowledge that their discipline is limited because of the existence of mythical pasts? If he is not prepared to recognise that non-humanistic ways of being are life-ways in their own right that should not be displaced by humanism, why should historians be prepared to recognise subaltern pasts as life-ways in their own right that should not be incorporated by historicism?

Suffice it to say, my intention here is neither to defend history at the expense of mythical thinking nor anti-humanism at the expense of humanism. Rather, it is to highlight the limits of Chakrabarty’s own discourse, both its logical and political limits. No doubt, there are many Western scholars who would accept Chakrabarty’s argument. The examples that come readily to mind are, first, ethnographers who have themselves been struggling against evolutionism for the most part of the twentieth century and second, post-structuralist scholars. But this would be a self-interested and in a certain sense condescending endorsement, since the postcolonial argument confirms what these scholars have already argued.
and confirmed themselves. It would be the endorsement of those who have already decided the limits of history in an inaugural and founding act, which is to say, an act that opens up the discursive field in which one can speak about history in this way — an endorsement, in short, that authorises Chakrabarty’s own discourse. Such are the political limits of a dependent discourse. If Chakrabarty’s book ‘provincializes Europe’ at all, this is only because Western scholars, or at least some of them, have already decided to ‘provincialize’ it themselves; the extent to which Europe is provincialised by Chakrabarty’s book is the extent delimited and approved by Europe itself; Chakrabarty’s provincialisation of Europe is dependent on Europe itself for its effectiveness. This is another way of saying that dependent discourses cannot provincialise Europe. The West remains at the centre of the world even when, or rather because it decides to provincialise itself. It is still the centre precisely because it is it that authorises its own ‘decentring’.

Any postcolonial attempt to provincialise Europe and decentre the West should indeed aim at demonstrating the limits of history. Postcolonial discourse should also aim at demonstrating the limits of anthropology, sociology, philosophy, of Western discourses in general. Yet it should strive to do so not by writing subaltern histories, native anthropologies, indigenous sociologies or philosophies — not, that is, by writing within the discursive domain opened up and authorised by the powers that be. The aim rather should be to write the history of history, the anthropology of anthropology, the sociology of sociology and the philosophy of philosophy. And if this writing has already been done, say, by post-structuralism, postcolonial discourses should write the post-structuralism of post-structuralism and the metanarrative of metanarratives. And if this too has been done — for in this game ‘it’s turtles all the way down’ or, if one prefers, turtles all the way up — then the meta-metanarrative of any Western metanarrative, all the way down and all the way up. The aim should be to write what the West cannot write if it is to say anything at all, including what any form of Western deconstruction cannot write (for, after all, it too is saying something). Any postcolonial attempt to decentre the West, in short, should write ‘unauthorised’, independent, logically extreme, uncompromisingly subversive discourses. To write like this however, one must be prepared to decline Western ‘gifts’. This is not to say that postcolonial scholars should turn native and write nativist discourses. If they did, they would be doing nothing less than to confirm themselves in their pre-assigned inferior status. Native scholars have no option but to play the dominant game. The crucial question is how to play it.

The academic game is the game of knowledge (and ignorance) which is inextricably, if not always intentionally, also a game of power. The only way to put an end to this game (the only way under conditions of domination, that is) is to play it better than the players themselves. The only way to undermine the power of Western definitions of the world that burden the rest of the world is to beat the powers that be at their own game. This is not
to say simply win one round of the game. It is to say, rather, play enough or as much as necessary to expose it for what it really is – only a game – a game not because it is innocuous but because it is arbitrary and cannot be grounded anywhere. It is also to say, play and win in such a way as to send the powers that be an unambiguous message: should they wish to play more of this game, it would be at their own risk. By way of illustration, let me turn briefly to a few examples of how games are played and struggles won from the ethnographic area that I know best, the Greek-speaking world.

One of the more interesting characteristics of the area is the agonistic ethos encountered in many communities. Being agonistic is not the same thing as being ant-agonistic. As Peristiany (1965: 188) points out in his study of a Cypriot highland village, a man is agonistic whenever ‘his isotimia, that is, his right to be treated as a person entitled to equal esteem [is violated]’ – for example, when the expatriate who has achieved success in the city returns to the village and treats the local people as inferiors. In general, the villagers studied by Peristiany do not seem to tolerate hierarchical relations of any sort. For even when their isotimia is not threatened by other men, there are still other powers to reckon with. ‘The Greek [Cypriot] who does not find opponents of honour commensurate with his own pits himself against Fate or the Gods. This is the sin of hubris’ (1965: 188). It may well be a sin, but, in such a social universe, a man would not allow even Fate or the Gods to offend his honour. He must challenge them in what can only be described as a metaphysical rebellion.

Peristiany made these observations in 1954 at a time when Cyprus was still a British colony, and, although much has changed since then, there is evidence to suggest that the agonistic ethos of the local people has not disappeared completely. Nonetheless, to understand more fully how this ethos is put into practice, we must turn to another highland village, on another eastern Mediterranean island, the Greek island of Crete, and the work of Michael Herzfeld. In the village of Glendi men engage in agonistic displays that include such practices as the blood feud, bride abduction, the song duel and animal theft. Herzfeld (1985) calls such practices the ‘poetics of social interaction’. They are ‘poetic’ because, much like poetry, which suspends context and focuses on the message for its own sake, their aim is to project difference for its own sake. Projecting difference in this way makes the performer different and distinguishes him from those who are already distinguished. As Herzfeld points out:

in Glendi idiom, there is less focus on ‘being a good man’ than on ‘being good at being a man’ – a stance that stresses performative excellence. … Actions that occur at a conventional pace are not noticeable: everyone works hard, most adult males dance elegantly enough, any shepherd can steal a sheep on some occasion or other. What counts is … effective movement. … The work must be done with flair; the dance executed with new embellishments … and the [animal] theft must be performed in such a manner that it serves immediate notice on the victim of the perpetrator’s skill:
Glendiot agonistic displays, then, aim at performative excellence but apparently, there are no guarantees that the audience would necessarily judge them as such. Performances often fail to achieve the appropriate impact and as Herzfeld (1985: 18) points out, when they do fail – ‘a pointless quarrel’ would be an example of failure – local people remark that they ‘don’t say anything’. If they are deemed successful, on the other hand, they are said to ‘say something’ and ‘to have simasia, meaning’. The key seems to be risk. The greater the risk involved, the more meaning is generated; the more daring the undertaking, the greater the admiration for the performer. ‘A truly gifted performer may win kudos for sheer nerve, as when he invites policemen to sit down with him to a meal of the meat of the animal he has just stolen’ (Herzfeld 1985: 47). Flirting with risk seems to be the basis of the Cypriot highlanders’ ideology as well. As Peristiany (1965: 188) points out, for villagers ‘a true man is one who is prepared to stake everything on one throw of the dice’.

What sort of meaning, then, do successful agonistic performances generate? What is it that they say which local people find significant? Herzfeld argues that the frequency with which Glendiots use the word simasia (meaning) suggests that in their worldview ‘nothing ... can be regarded as subject to fixed definition, nothing ... is certain’ (1985: 18). This is an important insight. If nothing is ‘fixed’ and ‘certain’, whatever presents itself as immutable, natural and necessary – and in an agonistic, fiercely egalitarian universe that would be above all power – must be exposed for what it is: arbitrary and groundless. Agonistic performances generate meaning and ‘say something’, then, because they expose in practice the arbitrary nature of power and confirm what the villagers already know. Indeed, they often do so in such playful and, for the powers that be, embarrassing ways, that the audience can only laugh at the grandiose claims of power. Consider, for example, the case of the animal thief who ridicules the police by making them unwitting accomplices to his theft, or the case of the gambler who ridicules Fate by staking everything on one throw of the dice.

The present discourse is inspired by the agonistic ethos of the Cypriot and Cretan highlanders and uses similar tactics. One of its aims is to make the audience laugh at the grandiose claims of Western discursive power – the audience in question being those who are at the receiving end of this form of power. It strives to expose the arbitrary nature of Western power and to remind Others what they already know: that it is naive, to say the least, to think that one small group of societies, in an insignificant part of the world, during an infinitesimal (in the wider scheme of things) time-span has reached such a level of enlightenment as to decide for all of us what it means to Be. It strives to do so by performing according to the rules established by the powers that be themselves, on their home ground, by beating them at their
own game. This being a game of knowledge, the aim of this agonistic discourse is to expose the ignorance of the powers that be and self-proclaimed authorities on knowledge. The aim is to show what it is about Others but also, and more importantly, about themselves that ethnographers must remain oblivious to.

Yet this discourse is not only written for the amusement of Others. It is also intended for the benefit of another audience, namely, ethnographers and other Western scholars – the true natives of anthropology. In this case, too, it is inspired by the ethos, and follows closely the unorthodox tactics and ‘unauthorised’ practices of gamblers and animal thieves.

As Herzfeld points out, the stealing of animals in highland Crete is a symbolic practice. The thief’s aim is not to enlarge his flock and to gain power. Rather, the theft is intended to serve as notice to those who already possess large flocks and exercise power. What is at stake, in other words, is the thief’s isotimia, his right to be treated as a person of equal ‘esteem’. This discourse engages in a kind of theft in its own right – the ‘stealing’ of the discursive logic, methods and conceptual tools of anthropology and, more broadly, of the Western episteme, which it uses to talk about anthropology and the West. Its aim is not to produce more knowledge or to claim the truth for itself but simply to demonstrate what is already known: that judging on the basis of the discursive logic, methods and conceptual tools of the Western episteme, there is no Western discourse – not a single one – that can be grounded anywhere or in anything except in its own arbitrariness. This discourse is also intended to serve as notice to those who claim to be authorities on knowledge and exercise power: there is no Western discourse that cannot be exposed in its groundlessness and arbitrariness, not a single one – including those that expose groundlessness and arbitrariness – that cannot be disenchanted and demythologised. Should the powers that be wish to play more of the game of knowledge and power, it would now be at their own risk.