

## **On being ‘carried by the field’. Some thoughts on the reverse anthropology of ethnography.**

Years ago, just before Philippe and I travelled to Ecuador for an extended period of field-work among the Jivaroan Achuar, we went to see Claude Lévi-Strauss, our thesis supervisor, for a final briefing. We explained to him in tedious detail what exactly what we were planning to do, when, how and with what aims in mind. After a while, he waved a hand dismissively, said ‘yes, yes, that’s fine...’ – and rose to see us out. At the door, he added, with a characteristic shrug and ironic half-smile, ‘... *laissez-vous porter par le terrain*’ – ‘...let yourself be carried by the field’. Since then, I’ve often thought about the meaning of that valediction, and in this brief paper I will follow Lévi-Strauss’s recommendation by allowing myself to be carried (and likely carried away) by his formulation of it.

Retrospectively, I understand LS to have meant ‘let yourself be guided to whatever is of central interest to the people you work with’. I won’t go into my reasons for thinking that this interpretation of LS’s intended meaning is not entirely fanciful, because I want to focus here on its implicit premise, namely that the people we work with – ‘the Natives’, whoever they may be – must harbor something in the nature of a desire for engaging with the ethnographer in order to lead her to those elements of their culture they most value, and that they share to some degree the anthropologist’s capacity to objectify – to stand at a distance from- their culture. The practice of anthropology, in that view, would be the art of detecting and tuning in to the ‘desire for ethnography’.

The question then becomes ‘what is the nature of the Native’s anthropological desire and what are its sources? What kind of ‘unhinging’ are they aspiring to when they consent to it?’

It is a remarkable fact that we have no ready answer to these questions to the problem. For all the discipline’s obsession with reflexivity and its incessant quest for new fields of inquiry, it has yet to produce an empirically grounded, in-depth study of the experience of being the subject of an ethnographical investigation. Still, despite this absence we are not without some elements of response to the question I have just raised. Since the reflexive turn of the late 70’s, much has been said about the textual representation of the ethnographic relation, about its pragmatics, about the ethical and political issues it involves. Yet, however dialogic these discourses claim to be, do not tell us, or only hint at, how their native interlocutors understood what an ethnographic inquiry is about, what kinds of reflexivity about their culture it triggered., in short, how they conceptualized the relation between their ‘I’ and the ‘We’ they

were taken to stand for, and how the 'I' of the ethnographer related to his or her 'We'. These are things that can only be guessed at, inferred by abduction, Ginzburg-style, from the traces deposited both in the written texts finally produced, in the stories anthropologists tell each other about their field experiences and, increasingly, in the native productions that have emerged in the aftermath of the ethnographic experience.

First, a quick word about the setting within which the ethnographic relation unfolds.

Invariably, our 'native informants' are all deeply worried people; worried both by the threat of unwanted change hanging over their life-ways and by the implications for them of standing between two worlds. Because worry is becoming a global predicament – now more so than ever- we tend to forget that it has long been a defining feature of our subjects (in every sense of that word). Since its beginnings, anthropology has always worked preferentially with people who had (and still have) very good reason to be worried by the spread of 'Modernity' and who, long before us, have lived through the 'collapse of the future' (Ardener 1985: 57). This primary orientation of anthropology toward people who are collectively experiencing existential disquiet does lead one to wonder whether worried subjects are in fact necessary for the practice of anthropology. Would it be stretching things to claim that being in a state of trouble about the disjointed condition of the lived world is a requisite for the emergence of the 'desire for ethnography', itself a precondition for the unfolding of the ethnographic relation? It may be apposite here to remember LS's narrative or parable of his visit to the Mundé, in chapter 31 of *Tristes Tropiques*. These Indians were in 1938 an anthropologist's dream: an uncontacted group, promising the exceptional chance of actually living the inaugural moment of anthropology and carrying out first-contact ethnography. But the experience was a bitter failure. Though the Mundé showed no hostility toward their visitors, they offered them no sign of a willingness to communicate and evinced no interest in engaging with them. As LS tells it, it was like coming up against a glass wall: he and the Mundé could see each other, but nothing happened between them; nothing happened, according to him, because these Indians were still oblivious of the looming presence of History as it is produced by Whites and had not yet been distanced from themselves by its workings. In a word, they were still too unworried to feel any 'desire for ethnography'.

And of course, our 'subjects' are not the only ones to be worried. Long before our own future began to collapse and worry – over climate change, the threat of pandemics, the growth of inequality and the inexorable expansion of commodification - became a universally shared mood, anthropologists have always been existentially troubled people, drawn to their vocation

by some sense of unease with, or distance from, their own society as well as their place in it, and practicing their discipline with an inbuilt reflexive pessimism. This they carry into the field - itself the ultimate disquieting experience – and something of this multi-layered unease is inevitably perceived, however equivocally, by the people we study.

This then would seem to be the paradigmatic setting of the ethnographic relation: an encounter between people who are worried, for different but sometimes partially converging reasons, who experience and express unease in different ways, and who are aware of their interlocutor's disquiet, however they choose to interpret its origin. A shared sense of worry, albeit fraught with ambiguity, actually makes for a good meeting ground in pragmatic terms, because it implies the possibility of empathy combined with a degree of wariness about each other's moral dispositions, a suspicion further compounded by the language problem, regardless of how great or small the differences may be between the speech usages of the anthropologist and his hosts. Still, we know that linguistic incomprehension is no barrier to communication and it also has its upside: it makes room for time, play, deceit and ambivalence – and of course it focuses the attention of all parties concerned on the issue of translation.

Some of the reasons why it might be desirable to engage with an anthropologist are obvious enough. We're all at least partially aware during field-work of the uses we may be put to by our hosts, as pawns in local power games, as witnesses to be produced in dealings with State or international agencies, as guarantors of the fact that they possess a culture and are thus entitled to certain rights and benefits, etc. But there is clearly something more than considerations of political opportunism at play in the Natives' consent to the presence of an ethnographer. Using the anthropologist as an '*idiot utile*' does not necessarily entail a willingness to engage in any form of transduction ; indeed, such uses could well work – and sometimes do – as a strategy for tightening the boundaries of cultural intimacy and refusing to participate in the work of translation.

Given their worry over the uncertainty of what is happening to them and the world, surely part of the Natives' desire for ethnography lies in the fact that it offers them an opportunity for close, first-hand observation of a representative of the world that is causing their worry, in other words for conducting reverse ethnography and trying to get a handle on what is of central interest for Whites. This kind of research, mirroring our own enquiries, is something that we are not always aware of during field-work and that at best we come to perceive much

later, once we start analyzing what our ethnographic experience has done to our language and our concepts.

The Jivaroan Achuar of Western Amazonia I began to work with in the late seventies –my ‘Natives’ of reference - were clearly nonplussed by questions about their ‘customs’, because at that time they did not know they possessed a culture, although they had begun to grasp that ‘culture’ lay at the core of what the Whites saw as the primary factor of differentiation between them and the Natives. One of the main reasons for their perplexity rested in the fact that while we anthropologists seemed to think that their particularity lay in what they thought and in the reasons for their practices, they assumed that our particularity as Whites lay in the nature of our bodies. In line with the ‘multinaturalist’ premises built into their way of construing the world as initially defined by Viveiros de Castro, they held that bodies and their species-specific ethological behavior are the crucial site of difference between kinds, the source of these species’ way of engaging with and acting on the world. By contrast, what we term culture was for them a locus of non-differentiation, since all beings (human or non-human) who can see themselves as humans necessarily possess a language, the knowledge required to sustain their life-ways, to perform rituals, to interact in the proper manner, in other words have ‘culture’, a generic, universal feature of ‘humans’ that as such cannot be the source of their bodily incarnated difference. This is why Amazonian Indians, as all their ethnographers can testify, are so interested in our bodies and the way they function. As has been said, “their sociology is a physiology” ; thus, what we eat, how we walk, sleep, defecate, make love, quarrel...are all vital clues to essential distinctiveness. In short, while we are observing them as ethnographers, they are observing us as naturalists.

Amazonian Natives are acutely interested not only in observing what White bodies habitually do. To further explore their particularities, they seek to try them out. Thus, to get a handle on White’s obsession with ‘culture’ as a principle of differentiation, they test some of the white bodily practices they see the ethnographer performing – or perhaps, more accurately, they try to perform indigenous practices they see as commensurable with white practices *as if* they were performed by white bodies. Thus it should come as no surprise that the Nambikwara ‘chief’ undertook in experimental vein to reproduce the act of writing, or that the Caduveo engaged with the anthropologist by offering him their drawings of facial tattooing, or that the Bororo consented to perform rituals under the camera’s eye in order to experience what it is like to be observed from the outside. Such mimetic performances clearly play an important role in the elaboration of our ethnographic reports. A telling example is that of Antonio

Guzman, Reichel-Dolmatoff's Desana assistant: by his own account, he equated the kind of knowledge sought by anthropologists with the specialized knowledge on myths and ritual acts held by Desana savants; and by assisting Reichel, he set out to become simultaneously an indigenous savant and an anthropologist. The kind of works being currently produced by indigenous people offers further abundant testimony of the reciprocal mimesis involved in the ethnographic relation. In short, much of what we present as 'culture' stems from the acts of commensuration carried out by our native hosts in response to our own operations of commensuration

To sum up, while we are busy 'imagining a culture for people who do not imagine it for themselves', as Wagner memorably phrased it, they are engaged in a parallel endeavor to get at what is really of 'central interest' to the ethnographer and the collective he stands for. In this sense, the Native and the anthropologist are, as Hertzfeld put it, 'engaged in directly comparable intellectual operations' For example, the kinds of reflexivity involved in these parallel but different anthropologies are no doubt similar, as are the problems of translation they are linked to. Hanks and Severi have recently reminded us that translation is a permanent process in any and every culture – is in fact the stuff of what we call culture – and is necessarily tied to specific kinds of reflexivity, since, beyond the automatic reflexivity built into any form of interaction with an Other, the internal switching of codes and registers constitutive of culture imply some form of mental objectivation of both of the source and the target'. What is specific to the ethnographic context is that these kinds of translation become problematic, because neither party involved knows what the other knows or doesn't know. This context leads to a further kind of reflexivity of a 'non ordinary' sort, perhaps similar in some ways to varieties of ritual reflexivity because of the weight of perplexity it involves. However, direct similarity of mental operations, as EVC forcefully reminds us, does not mean direct translatability, because the framing of these intellectual processes can be quite distinct, hinging on sharply divergent unquestioned premises about what it is to be human, to communicate, to think, to aggregate in 'societies' or to 'possess' culture. What I am trying to say is, in a nutshell, that reflexivity about one's own shared life-forms, and therefore about others', is a built-in feature of culture in general and that the affordance offered by the ethnographic relation is the possibility of giving a shape, always historically situated, to this reflexivity. This means that ethnography is fundamentally an exercise in translating indigenous modes of translation. It also means that the desire for ethnography is inextricably linked to political imaginaries.

In the Amazonian context, the kind of reflexivity triggered by wondering what the ethnographer is really interested in and why feeds on Lowland Indians' predisposition to value difference over sameness and thus to aspire to some kind of relation with 'outsidedness'. There are two sides to this gravitation toward alterity, both of which have been abundantly discussed in Amazonianist literature. One side is the drive to capture elements of alterity – names, trophies, songs, live or dead beings....- considered necessary for social/biological reproduction. The other side is the impulse to 'become other', to change into and experience another type of corporality, a metamorphosis that entails affiliating with the collective this type of body belongs to. This is what shamans do and it is also a process that is salient in war-related ritual performances, where the killer may gradually morph into the Enemy, assume the position of a God or become a supernatural animal. This aspiration to become other is also evident in the ample record, dating back to pre-conquest times, of outbreaks of millenarist movements, generally implying a radical shift away from ordinary or customary practice and behavior; and while many of them seem to be initiated by persons who are marginal to the group or stand at least partially outside it, they do not necessarily require the presence of a prophet figure. Such movement testify to the importance and permanence of Amazonians' readiness to try out different ways of inhabiting and acting on the world. This rich mental stock of alternative ways of life evidently forms a central strand of the relation they develop with their ethnographers, insofar as the ethnographic situation triggers the memory of the imaginaries feeding these movements, the *nostalgie du futur* that inhabits them. And this inevitably combines – or collides- with the nostalgia for the past that is built into anthropology. Nostalgia is not only a mood common to many anthropologists; it is parceled into the discipline's tool kit, in that we routinely rely on comparison between past and present states of the society under study to understand the nature and direction of the changes that have affected it. Thus, while Amerindians compare their present to an imagined future, we use the past – theirs and sometimes ours – as a resource for imagining an alternative world for ourselves. However equivocally, this shared aspiration for a different kind of difference is what, ultimately, lies at the heart of the desire for ethnography.