

About the report

by Vincenzo Padiglione*

"The truth is that, in general, science is not of the stateless, and that, in particular, the science of ethnology is developing as a deliberate challenge to its own western origins prompted by the initial scandal of the ethnographic encounter"
(De Martino 1962, p. 74).

I would like to position the discourse I am about to present in a matrix that I would call post-empirical. This approach, deriving from the great debate going on in the domain of history of science since the 1960s, especially with the works of Kuhn, and now an interpretative *koine*, is a way of viewing knowledge for many of us researchers, whatever our allegiance. In those decades and in convergence with deconstructivism, I see the emergence of a perspective that is particularly dear to me: hermeneutics. This entails the awareness that one can know the world of others or that of the past only through words and viewpoints that are inevitably limited, situated in the present, in contemporary culture. We must get evidence very thoroughly and at the same time exploit the resources of our own language to talk about others, and to talk about the past: language keeps us drastically rooted. But this is not just a limit, it is also a resource if we manage to force our words, twist our way of seeing so as to capture exceptions and otherness. From a hermeneutic point of view, we extend our cultural confines by acting out the limits of our resources, because of the rigorous comparison both with the past and with different cultural modes, contemporary to us (Padiglione, 1997).

I hope this discourse of mine will become more comprehensible below. To this end, I feel it is a good idea to think about three paradigmatic metaphors: *discovering the truth*, *illuminating*, *de-familiarising*, which in my opinion have in the past century allowed us to imagine the purposes and methods of scientific knowledge.

a) *Discovering the truth* – or producing objective knowledge through theories describing the world as it is where truth equals correspondence to reality, and language is a neutral reflection. Consistent with this positivistic goal, the method is supreme: one single scientific method to investigate any dimension of reality, and to unify the knowledge of it since reality (animals, men, the universe, etc) is presumed to have an identical structure. In this case the privileged research model is the laboratory of the physical world. In anthropology it was said that for the anthropologist, humanity was a “living laboratory” (from Frazer to Mead) within which “controlled comparison” was to be carried out.

b) *Illuminating unplumbed depths* – making the implicit explicit, going beyond the evidence, highlighting what is hidden, what works in the shadows. Consistently with this clearly humanistic objective (historical, archaeological), the object becomes dominant over the method: there is a hidden structure behind things, there is a superficial covering (ego, conscience, ideology, for the “school of suspicion” nurtured by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud) which hides reality, its causes or the meaning of phenomena; there is an observation that improves from a distance (Lévi-Strauss). The evidence is made up of different, discontinuous levels which it is necessary to penetrate with separate methodologies, qualitative and quantitative approaches. Anthropology becomes the knowledge of man in what is most specific to him: cultural living. Ethnography becomes a viewpoint on the right scale for the village and for relationships.

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c) *De-familiarising experience* – breaking the commonly shared understanding thanks to the possibility of incorporating anomalous knowledge leading to a revision of the cognitive and ethical schemata of one’s shared vision, etc. In fitting with this aim, clearly of 1900s artistic inspiration, there emerges the dominance of point of view: perspectivism and hermeneutics. To interpret ambiguous messages properly, it is necessary to be in touch with the level of “pre-knowledge about the functioning of the world”, which the researcher assumes as his mental disposition, being historically a cultural subject. Ethnography is a situated knowledge which rejects objectivity and emphasises the way researchers and natives make their two points of view converge, using the cultural resources they are part of in order to construct interpretations of the world and of others. Personal involvement is not considered a necessary evil but is the fulcrum of knowledge-getting. The research does not lead to a subjective experience but, through intersubjective practices (dialog), aims to produce mutual understanding of the self and the other person of a de-familiarising sort. In this way its reflexive intention of cultural criticism is central. For Geertz ethnography is the translation of one culture into the categories of another. According to post-modern anthropologists, this practice “provides reports on other worlds from the inside and reflects on the epistemological background of such reports” (Marcus & Fisher, 1986, p. 30), and “uses cultural wealth for the growth of the self” (Marcus & Fisher 1986, p. 28).

The position that today seems the most widespread, and with which I identify, states that there is no longer the dominance of the idea of seeking a truth, of illuminating the depths and disdaining the surface, but recognises the growing value in the defamiliarizing function of science (Padiglione, 1997).

To enrich this discourse and position it in research practice, I will provide some ideas that specifically refer to anthropology and to its current developments, at least as I see them. I will talk about three stages (who knows why we still greatly prefer threefold classifications) in contemporary anthropology, shown schematically in figure 1.

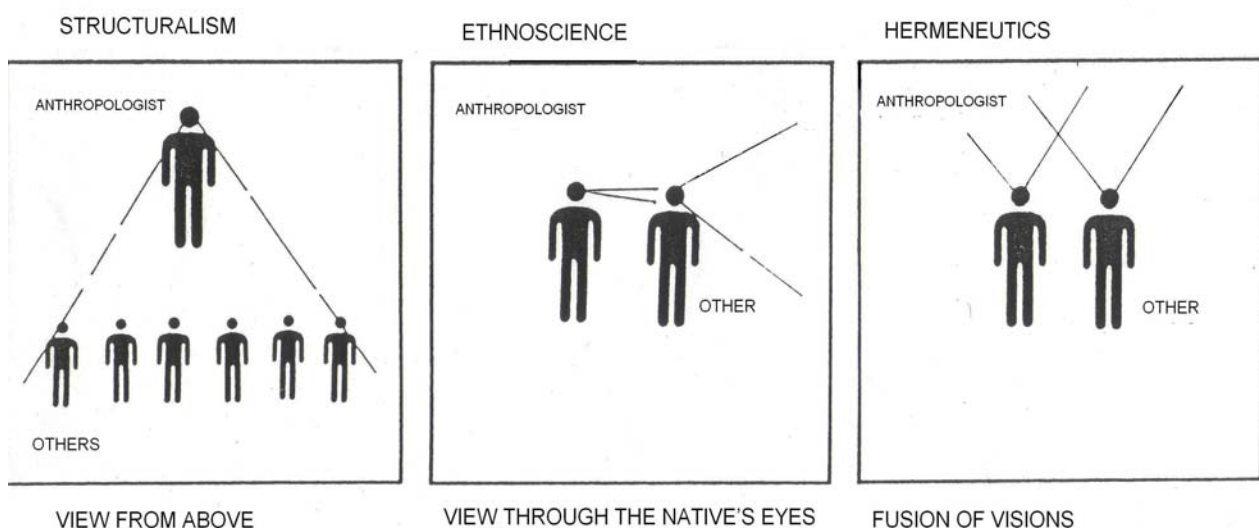


Figure 1 The “observation” of the Other in three theoretical views (Salomond, 1982: 75).

The great movements that marked the second half of the 1900s are Structuralism, Ethnoscience and Cultural hermeneutics. Structuralism was personified by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who we now congratulate for reaching his century. In Ethnoscience, Goodenough should be mentioned, and Hermeneutics had its greatest figure in Geertz (1998, 2001), who recently died. It is important to imagine these theoretical perspectives to be able to

understand the sector in which I stand, Cultural hermeneutics, which I feel is close to sensibilities expressed by some psychologist colleagues.

In the first case we have an anthropologist who observes from a distance. Lévi-Strauss says that one can know the human world only if one does not get too close to it, because from close-up cultural and subjective differences emerge which hinder abstraction. In other words they prevent one from grasping the common universal elements that for Lévi-Strauss, with an obvious reference to Kant, constitute the mind's enclosed generating principles and ways of acting. There is a mental *a priori* that is found everywhere but that can be grasped only if the observer is at a suitable distance so as not to be disturbed by details. The second case represents the supposition, typical of Ethnoscience – reference point for the cognitive anthropologists that worked above all in the 1960s – of being able to enter the native's mind and reconstruct the classifications generated by a localised form of thinking. The culture reconstructed by the anthropologist identifies a more or less harmonious complex of taxonomies, of classifications, everything the native must know to be a member of his group. In this way the anthropologist is presumed to cultivate the capacity to place himself in the other person's mind, with the latter being identified as a coherent taxonomic warp. The third model states that one can know only in a situation, in a relationship that is going on in the here and now. I know only by trying to construct a state of intersubjectivity, creating the opportunity for the other and the self to relate with their load of preconceptions and ways of thinking, heard and acted out. It is in the relationship established, in the spaces, in the potentialities and in the intrinsic limits of this context constructed together, that we can know and share the other person's world. In this third case I cannot expect to have access *a priori*, in universal schemata, as in structuralism, nor can I aspire to penetrate the hidden recesses of the other's mind, to identify with the native and with his thoughts, as in Ethnoscience. As a cultural hermeneuticist I must admit my limits in knowing the other person. My limits are in being positioned myself, in having implicitly and explicitly constructed constraints and potentialities for the relationship (Padiglione, 1997).

If we look at the third picture in figure 1, referring to hermeneutics, we see that the encounter of the anthropologist's vision with that of the Other person creates an area of overlap. I can only know the space of overlapping of the vision of the two. I can thematise this space and problematize it, but I cannot do so for the rest. There is the assumption of the limit of knowledge, and of the opacity of the other's world. At the same time, that intersubjective world actually becomes for me as a researcher the raw material of knowledge, the terrain, or the field of my research. In other words it becomes a way for me to reflect on my cultural self.

The two metaphors that Geertz uses about culture, that of a *spider web* and a *text*, are highly effective in making us think about the advantages of ethnographic research. Culture is like a spider web in that we are trapped in it although we also act as its constructors. It offers us limits and resources. Hence the need to take a rather tortuous route that brings us to meet other cultures because if we remain encapsulated in the cocoon of our spider web, we will not be able to understand it, and understand ourselves.

Culture is like a *text*, states another fundamental thesis put forward by Geertz: just as the text must be interpreted because it is not self-evident, so we have to deal with culture, with the lifestyle of the people we study.

The anthropologists' object is never crude data: if anything it is something that on the one hand incorporates the native interpretations and on the other is constructed from scratch by the research process itself. We anthropologists have to interpret the interpretations of others, or use the researcher's schemata to interpret the natives' conceptual schemata. Precisely because it challenges the researcher's initial categories, this tortuous process of defamiliarizing knowledge-getting, constitutes the specific excellence of ethnography.

The clearest formulation of this device comes, in my view, from Ernesto De Martino who first in "Il mondo magico" [The world of magic] foreshadows the project and later in the preparatory notes for his book "La fine del Mondo" [The end of the world], published

posthumously, he defines it as critical Ethnocentrism and identifies an inevitable, expected outcome of the ethnographic encounter.

De Martino foreshadows the reflexive and hermeneutic shift signalling the intrinsic limits of ethnographic knowledge and its potentialities for reflection. This knowledge is inevitably found within a paradox, from which it is possible to emerge only by radically accepting it. We can know others, cultures alien to us, only thanks to our words which are obviously limited and revolve around prejudices. However, if we give up our words, we lose all possibility of knowing.

In the study of the world of magic this question was obvious. How can we know magic, if our scientific approach is the product of an anti-magic attitude that has made modernity radically uniform? The categories of the researcher and his/her sensibility cannot be exempted. They are enmeshed and fettered by this situation. They are doomed to ethnocentricity.

Therefore if we use the idea of magic we impoverish others' experience because this idea is so inevitably part of us, constructed and saturated, that it is an obstacle to knowing the other person. Ernesto De Martino believes that it is thanks to the encounter with the Other person, thanks to the scandal represented by the fact that he is an exception to our dominance, that we can reconsider our way of categorising. Our limit in perceiving the world comes to be breached through a relationship with what up to that time has been indifferent to us. The ethnographic encounter serves to reconsider the self and the Other, giving the opportunity to overcome the limits of our knowledge and the human nature of our identity, because of a specific meeting which prompts a mutual repositioning.

"To observe what is culturally alien, it is necessary to use certain categories of observation, without which the cultural phenomena cease to appear to the observer. These categories are: religion, magic, technique; myth, rite; art; economy, society; law; politics; soul, spirit, strength; normal and abnormal, sane and psychically ill; history, culture. But these categories have grown together, both in their distinctions and in the historical-cultural controversies within which they were distinguished, with the cultural history of the west from the Greeks until today: there is therefore the risk that, in taking them as alien cultures, non-participants in this history, it is our history that will be unconsciously and a-critically attributed to these cultures, along with our controversies, our choices, our categorial distinctions, thus bringing right from the start an ethnocentric distortion to the phenomena being observed. The paradox is therefore that either we do not use our categories of observation, in which case nothing can be observed, or we use them, in which case we will merely observe a projection of our culture onto the alien culture, but never the alien culture itself. The paradox can be overcome when one becomes aware of the ethnocentric limitation of the observation categories used by the western ethnographer; when one explicitly traces back the western history imbued in the observation categories; therefore when one knows in what sense they must be subject to *epoché*, not being relevant to alien cultures; when through this *epoché*, the alien meaning in question is made to appear; and lastly, when the appearance of this alien meaning leads to a reform of the western categories of observation and to an increase in anthropological knowledge" (De Martino, 1977, p. 333).

With Critical ethnocentrism, De Martino takes *heroic historicism* to its methodological consequences, i.e. the exposure of the naive realism begun in "The world of magic". There is no standpoint from which to observe without distorting reality, nor can one be easily aware of such a limit. What is to be done then? We can only – notice the exorcistic device – make sure, thanks to the ethnographic encounter, that the distortion and prejudice is manifested, when our categories for interpreting cultural otherness prove to be inadequate. It is precisely the impact with the culturally different that can generate the *representation of crisis* (denial of our limits, resistance and scandal concerning our presumed universality, the claim of cultural hegemony) that can preclude its transformation. Placing prejudice in the research process does not herald the advent of a finally objective, transparent knowledge, but is only the reflexive elaboration of internal limits to the practice of knowing.

I wonder whether in this question of anthropology, there are analogies indicating similarities and differences with the perspective that psychoanalysis opened with transference and counter-transference. I see some analogies between this process of reflection and of redefinition of one's cultural self, because of the meeting with the Other person, and the model of transference and counter-transference that is one of the main contributions that psychoanalysis has made to the doubtful thinking of the 1900s.

To cause a crisis of belonging. This seems to me to be the purpose of Critical Ethnocentrism. De Martino says: science is not of the stateless. I think this idea of incarnate science is important. It reminds us that science is made of contexts, people, biographies, institutions and communities (the scientific and university worlds are also worlds of belonging) and of inevitable relations that can only partly be reduced to knowledge and even less to abstract thoughts. Inside a scientific community there are powers and conventions that are also the product of stories and contexts. Therefore our words, like our practices, are inside this belonging and we must continually challenge them. The ethnographic encounter serves to thematise the world of categories which intellectuals, too, take for granted. It was with a different approach, admittedly a little scientific, but in the same reflexive direction, that Bourdieu recently travelled, foreshadowing the "objectivisation of the objectivising subject" as the outcome of research.

The final outcomes of the 1990s gave us this advantage: forcing us to come to terms with the sense of limits. Until the 1960s the dominant idea was that we could easily defeat the other person, the past, elaborating generalised scenarios within which to include otherness and meanings that threatened modernity. Today we are more aware of the limits of our knowledge and this awareness is expressed in a style of writing often using the first person (Padiglione, 1997, 2001, 2004, 2007), more cautious, less schematic and irrefutable than in the past, itself a symbol/symptom of a period that was not very euphoric at a cultural level. Undoubtedly there is visible evidence of what we have said so far in the researchers' texts. I find myself perfectly at ease in the project on data in this seminar reflecting about reporting, in that I think writing on what one has investigated is a practice that is crucial for the production of knowledge. Writing is by far the main context through which we construct, compare and convey scientific discourses. This might seem a trite statement and yet it is a relatively recent advance also largely the result of post-empiricism and post-structuralism. It has only been since the eighties that the wiser researchers have been thinking systematically, often using the tools of literary criticism, about the poetics and politics implicit in their way of writing, thus finding surprising implicit references to hidden contexts and authors, literary affectations connected to belonging to schools and academies, practices of making distinctions and of social exclusion. The most obvious outcome seems to be the triggering of a phase of liberatory exploration in scientific writing where the researcher no longer naively aspires to neutral denotative language, but considers the use of metaphor and narration a resource for communication that recreates the complexity and density experienced in the research. A corollary of this new way of magnifying the role of writing in science is the fact that the researcher expresses himself, recognises himself and monitors himself as the author of the text. This has given rise to a new kind of scientific writing in the social sciences and in particular in anthropology, a style that at times converges with memoirist writing and that above all requires specific reflection, documentation and interpretation of the relationship established by the researcher with the object of study, of the fact that he is always in the scene even when he considers himself external and neutral, and the hand to hand struggle with the object and with the text.

To sum up what has been said so far on the specificities that marked anthropological researchers as being in syntony with the reflexive shift, with post-empiricism, and with the hermeneutics of the second half of the 1900s, we can quote one of the protagonists, Renato Rosaldo: "The ideal, once dominant, of the detached observer who used neutral language to explain crude facts, was replaced by an alternative project that aims to

understand human conduct as it is revealed over time, in history and in relation to its meaning for the actors” (1989, p. 23).

In contemporary social sciences (1985) there has supposedly been – with the emergence of interpretative approaches – a change: in the object of analysis, in the language of analysis, in the position of the analyst who, as I mentioned at the outset, has promoted a reflexivity that we could call “textual” (Padiglione, 1997). This emphasises the artificial, constructed nature of the ethnographic report. Clifford calls ethnographies “real fictions” (1986, p. 5) and calls for experimentation in the direction of dialogism and polyphony.

As I said before, this change came about in the mid-’80s. I am referring to the comments that introduced a series of criticisms aimed at our way of working as anthropologists. Jonathan Fabian in “Il tempo e gli altri” [The time and the others] (2000) argues that anthropologists in the 1800s based their perspective on a prejudice. They did research in the assumption that others, their native interlocutors, were not actually their contemporaries. They called them primitive. They wrote about them with the idea of taking evidence from colonialism and modernisation, as the contexts of their ethnographic reports. They described them mainly as compact intact traditional worlds, a hangover of history which in other parts had advanced. This was a serious error of perspective (called *visualist* since it generated the illusion that remoteness in space also meant remoteness in time, considering them peoples moving towards our civilisation) which meant we were in the present and they were living in the past. In recent decades anthropologists have radically revised the textual devices responsible for producing cognitive and ethical discrimination. Above all, the use of the historical present, giving the illusion of dilating the present into the past with the risk of making the antiquarian attitude dominant, of losing the traces of contemporaneity, of constructing an image of the other person resistant to history, as well as objectivising writing, which transforms hearsay into observed events. From works like that of Fabian and from the anthology “Writing Culture” by Clifford and Marcus, there emerged the anthropologist’s critical interest in his own actions, which revolved around the writing that today constitutes an indisputable heritage.

Today there is greater vulnerability and publicity, because other people are at the same time objects and subjects. They are readers of our texts. This condition is different from historians and closer to psychologists. My ethnographic monograph, “the wild-boar hunter: a symbolic anthropology of hunting in Sardinia” (Padiglione, 1994), has been read and commented on by hunters. Today the natives, the others, are readers of anthropology, they are not objects of anthropology. This implies that the construction of an authoritative voice in the anthropological description becomes more open to negotiability. Being vulnerable in reports, having to negotiate our presence in various ways in the field without being able to rely on power relationships to protect the knowledge give an idea of the knowledge-getting today, in other words they signal new contexts of democracy in the acquisition of knowledge.

I will conclude on a circumscribed but prickly question. I would like a debate on the issue of history/memory, which I have no hesitation in saying is a point that at times divides historians and anthropologists. The historians often seem concerned and redefine the development of oral sources as “excess memory”, as if there were the risk of history losing its underpinnings and historiography being wasted, overcome by collective memories. It is obvious that the era of the witness¹ and the historical period we are going through poses challenging problems; but it also introduces new questions of cultural democracy. A lot of voices finally have the right to be heard, collected and told. I have created two museums on banditry (at Itri in the Latina area and at Cellere in the Viterbo area) (Padiglione, 2006), salvaging stories that were not part of official history. Thanks to these museums and to the research carried out, I now believe that these local histories may be partly integrated in a

¹ On this see Wieviorka, 1999.

general historical vision, marking the endurance of a non-pacified memory. Today we must accept, as a sign of cultural democracy, the fact that there is greater vulnerability in historical and anthropological reconstructions precisely because of a growing desire that has taken root in the local identity to provide testimony, showing different points of view on fundamental moments in contemporary history. Today research is being done on 'social remembering' by historians, anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists as well as by the witnesses themselves. We are all invited to see in this multiplication of researchers, sources and points of view, not just the Babel effect but also the new relevance that the sense of the past assumes for the policies and poetics of identity. And in this case, too, there is the need (cfr. Palombo, 2006) for an ethnographer to study it.

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