Excursions in Realist Anthropology

Excursions in Realist Anthropology: A Merological Approach

By

David Zeitlyn and Roger Just

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

Excursions in Realist Anthropology:
A Merological Approach,
by David Zeitlyn and Roger Just

This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2014 by David Zeitlyn, Roger Just

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-6403-X, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-6403-9

World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural.
—Louis MacNeice – *Snow* (January 1935)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ix

Chapter One 1
Introduction: Anthropology and the Philosophers

Chapter Two 13
Incompleteness and Partiality

Chapter Three 35
Excursus One: Do Mambila Cockerels Lay Eggs?
Reflections on Knowledge and Belief

Chapter Four 41
Charity Begins at Home: Metaphors, Beliefs and Cultural
Non-Translation

Chapter Five 59
Excursus Two: Ethnography as Fiction, or the Lies We Tell One Another

Chapter Six 63
In Defence of Rules: Pierre Bourdieu *en Grèce*

Chapter Seven 87
Excursus Three: Greek *Exotika* and Belief

Chapter Eight 99
Anthropological Translation

Chapter Nine 121
Concepts for Twenty- First Century Anthropology

Works Cited 133

Index 153

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Early versions of these chapters first appeared in the following places, and are used here with permission:

Chapter Two: Partiality and Partial Views

Zeitlyn, D. 2009. Understanding Anthropological Understanding: for a merological anthropology *Anthropological Theory* **9**, 209-31.

Chapter Three: Excursus One: Do Mambila Cockerels Lay eEgs? Reflections on Knowledge and Belief

Zeitlyn, D. 1991. Do Mambila Cockerels lay eggs? Reflections on knowledge and belief. *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* **22**, 64-9.

Chapter Five: Ethnography as Fiction, or the Lies We Tell One Another

Zeitlyn, D. 1993. Ethnography as Fiction - or the lies we tell one another. *International Journal of Moral and Social Studies* **8**, 175-78.

Chapter Six: In Defence of Rules: Pierre Bourdieu *en Grèce*

Just, R. 2005. In defence of rules: Pierre Bourdieu en Grèce. *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*. (15)1: 1-24.

Chapter Seven: Exotika

Part of Just, Roger. 1996. ‘Anthropology Bedeviled’. Review of Charles Stewart *Demons and the Devil: Moral Imagination in Modern Greek Culture. Arion* 4.2: 183-97.

Chapter Eight: Anthropological Translation

Part of Zeitlyn, D. 2005. *Words and Processes in Mambila Kinship: The Theoretical Importance of the Complexity of Everyday Life*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books (Rowman & Littlefield).

The authors gratefully acknowledge the work of Anna Rayne for challenging us to be clear about what we really, really want to say, helping to create a common voice and catching some of our inconsistencies and solecisms. The remaining faults are ours.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE PHILOSOPHERS

This book is a response by two anthropologists to the rhetorical advocacy of relativism in anthropology and related fields. We believe that our experience, both as fieldworking ethnographers and as humans in everyday social interactions, demands the adoption of some form of ‘middling realism’. We make frequent reference to philosophers and philosophically inspired anthropologists, but having considered the conceptual underpinning of anthropological research we keep returning to ethnographic concerns. Ultimately our concern is with anthropology itself, and if this book is taken as a plea for division of intellectual labour, leaving the philosophers to puzzle over the problems with realism, then so be it. In the end, the enterprise of anthropology is best understood and best practised from the basis of sophisticated realism. This provides sufficient support for anthropologists to fulfil their task: analysing and explaining how different social groups around the planet live and understand their lives. This is not a negligible task. Indeed, unlike philosophers of science and language, some anthropologists deal regularly with radical translation. Cross-cultural discussion and translation challenges any complacent acceptance of the apparent nature of the world. Yet our successes (however qualified) emphatically disprove claims that others live in worlds which cannot be comprehended: that is, claims of radical incommensurability.

Our premise runs against the grain of much contemporary anthropological theorizing, although not against the grain of ethnographic practice, where realism of some sort remains the inevitable recourse for both ethnographers and those with whom they interact. Part of our impatience with philosophy stems from the inevitable realism involved in anthropological practice (ethnography) and our own theoretical acceptance of bootstrapping or deferment which acknowledges that adherence: we are prepared to pull ourselves up by our ontological bootstraps, perhaps abducing our way into a sense of acting on an external world that is common to our fellow beings. We trust knowledgeable others when they tell us things (that the world is round, that moving electrons are electric current and so on) and continue our work in the light of this confidence, as others work in the light of other confidences. Recognition that those confidences are various need not entail commitment to hard relativism.

In writing thus against the grain, our views are bolstered by those of Michael Herzfeld, who in 1997 declared himself part of the 'militant middle ground' (165 ff). We are happy to count ourselves among his network of militants, although we are self-recruited and not necessarily marching to quite the same tune. Our aim is to counter the inadequate simplicity of extreme positions, especially those expressed as attacks on realism. Extreme relativism is as misguided as naive realism or positivism.[1] We believe that there is a large middle ground that can profitably be occupied by anthropologists. Further, we hold that the practice of anthropology (indeed the universal practice of social life) reveals that neither extreme position is tenable. To paraphrase Marx, our accounts are socially constructed but not in circumstances of our own making. Objects and people are recalcitrant (brick walls remain brick walls, impenetrable to humans; and babies cry, irrespective of our beliefs about them). This is sufficient to establish bridgeheads for everyday understandings of a common world, both physical and social. However, we do not claim that social construction is unimportant: as social anthropologists we insist on the importance of social construal. Yet we also insist that social anthropology and the experience of social life are such that social construction cannot explain *everything* about *all* concepts. Conversely, we do not claim that realism is straightforward, nor that it should be in any way reductive. Our point is that the opposite of positivism is *not* full-blown relativism, and equally that refuting relativism does not commit one to positivism. Hence our membership of Herzfeld's militant tendency. As Brian Morris puts it:

> The alternative to positivistic science and objectivism is not a facile acceptance of a neo-romantic textualism or hermeneutics, that espouses an idealistic metaphysic and cultural relativism. Thus anthropology must continue to follow the tradition of the historical sociologists (Marx,

---

[1] There are important differences between the terms realism, empiricism and positivism; these should not be used as synonyms. Briefly, realism holds that the world exists independently of people and their opinions or theories about it. Empiricism holds that we can learn about the world through observation and testing. Positivism is an extreme version of empiricism, that only observable phenomena exist. This is extremely schematic: we are very conscious that there is an enormous literature in philosophy and philosophy of science dedicated to the overlaps of and possible confusions between these ideas.

> Dilthey, Weber, Evans-Pritchard) and in combining hermeneutics (interpretive understanding) and empirical science (explanations) to repudiate both textualism and positivism. 1997: 336).

One of the six conditions for anthropology identified by Joao de Pina-Cabral is realism (2010:154-6). As he argues, these open 'the door in the middle'. As fellow militants, our aim is to help open that door.

Realism

Part of the militant middle ground position is that we can be realists without assuming a single definitive or synoptic overview (so we need not sign up to Marcel Griaule's vision of the aerial photograph, or these days the GoogleEarth view). There is no secular version of a god's-eye view to which our efforts can only approximate. Sandra Mitchell calls this a 'pluralist-realist' approach to ontology, 'which suggests not that there are multiple worlds, but that there are multiple *correct* ways to parse our world, individuating a variety of objects and processes that reflect both causal structures and our interests. The view that there is only one true representation of the world exactly mapping onto its natural kinds is hubris' (2009: 13, original emphasis; see also Pina-Cabral 2011). In keeping with this, we see the task of anthropology (although perhaps 'essentially contested' (Gallie 1956)) as rendering explicit the sorts of understandings that humans achieve when groups of people deal with each other: usually with those who are familiar, but also with those less so who may do things differently. Dealing with these issues is part of the human condition: anthropology has merely tried to explain how they are understood and dealt with. As Harry West, citing Roy Wagner's *The Invention of Culture* (1975: 35) puts it: 'because people – like the anthropologists who study them – construct rules, traditions and social facts in order to make sense of societies (in which *they* actually *live*), everyone is a fieldworker of sorts, everyone an anthropologist' (2007: 81, original emphases).

Such understanding of others' understandings can only be accomplished if there is a common starting point: some bedrock (however small) from which we can launch our investigation. The independence of that bedrock from social construction by any one social group is why we consider ourselves realists. However, to reiterate, this does *not* imply that there is a single best overall account of everything. Our militancy works both ways: both against the hard line 'everything is social construction' associated with strong relativism and post-modernism, and against quasi-scientific neo-positivism.[2]

We have avoided providing definitions of realism and relativism (and faithfulness and aptness). This is because our thesis sprang from a shared sense of mismatch between our fieldwork experiences and our readings in philosophy. Threading ourselves between different philosophical positions, we have avoided upfront definitions in order to avoid committing ourselves to a single camp. We know this might alienate committed partisans at both extremes. An important part of our argument is that words such as 'faithfulness' point to the complexity and entanglement of humans and the world. It is less a case of humans knowing the world (simple realism) or constructing the world in which they live (strong relativism) but rather humans from particular cultural backgrounds and for particular purposes making sense of an often recalcitrant world. The questions raised by the ambiguities of words like faithfulness (or aptness as used below) push us in fruitful directions as we try to make sense of and understand the complexity of human social organization (see Reyna 1997: 328ff on science and objectivity).
Notwithstanding, it would be unfair to our readers to abstain from giving any definition of realism, so we end this section with Andrew Sayer's definition:

> 1 The world exists independently of our knowledge of it.
> 2 Our knowledge of that world is fallible arid theory-laden. Concepts of truth and falsity fail to provide a coherent view of the relationship between knowledge and its object. Nevertheless knowledge is not immune to empirical check, and its effectiveness in informing and explaining successful material practice is not mere accident.
> 3 Knowledge develops neither wholly continuously, as the steady accumulation of facts within a stable conceptual framework, nor wholly discontinuously, through simultaneous and universal changes in concepts.
> 4 There is necessity in the world; objects - whether natural or social - necessarily have particular causal powers or ways of acting and particular susceptibilities.
> 5 The world is differentiated and stratified, consisting not only of events, but objects, including structures which have powers and liabilities capable of generating events. These structures may be present even where, as in the social world and much of the natural world, they do not generate regular patterns of events.

---

[2] This positions us with authors such as Boghossian (2006 esp. p94 fn5) and Detmer (2003).

> 6 Social phenomena such as actions, texts and institutions are concept-dependent. We therefore have not only to explain their production and material effects but to understand, read or interpret what they mean. Although they have to be interpreted by starting from the researcher's own frames of meaning, by and large they exist regardless of researchers' interpretations of them. A qualified version of 1 therefore still applies to the social world. In view of 4-6 the methods of social science and natural science have both differences and similarities.
> 7 Science or the production of any other kind of knowledge is a social practice. For better or worse (not just worse) the conditions and social relations of the production of knowledge influence its content. Knowledge is also largely - though not exclusively - linguistic, and the nature of language and the way we communicate are not incidental to what is known and communicated. Awareness of these relationships is vital in evaluating knowledge.
> 8 Social science must be critical of its object. In order to be able to explain and understand social phenomena we have to evaluate them critically (1992: 5-6).

Sayer writes as a critical realist. We discuss this and other forms of realism in the conclusion.

Partiality and Partial views

Our question is: what if the point of anthropology is not to produce a synoptic view of everything, as Griaule fantasized in 1937?[3] Anthropological holism notwithstanding, what if we accept our limitations and start thinking seriously and positively about partial views and incompleteness?[4] This produces a merological[5] anthropology. At a stroke several concerns evaporate: most importantly, rival interpretations no longer directly compete; instead they (potentially) complement one another. Only where they overlap may they compete, but usually they do not. Consider Mark Hobart's condemnation of the discipline in which his early career was made: 'The fact that laughter, fear, indeed so much of what people actually do and say, are so successfully eliminated or trivialised in most anthropological writings is a pretty damning indictment of our pretensions to knowledge' (1995: 66). We suggest that this is not an indictment but a humbling reminder that our knowledge is partial, and none the worse for it. This recognition of incompleteness is not, to our minds, an indictment. First, it is humbling in that we do not and cannot know everything. Secondly, it is a necessary consequence of a scientific orientation; as Hastrup puts it: 'knowledge must be *organized* information; in the case of anthropology it concerns the organized information about ways of living in the world and modes of attending to the world. The organization implies that knowledge is both *reductive* and *selective*' (2004: 456, original emphases). Thirdly, incompleteness leaves room for multiple other accounts, so it should reinforce anthropology's abstention from claims to exclusivity; it occupies a demarcated domain, whose boundaries are continually being challenged and shown to have been misunderstood. This is a healthy symptom of a progressive discipline. We *do* know more than we once did, which makes life for us considerably harder than it was for our illustrious predecessors. Moreover, different accounts (and tensions between them) may help explain some of the dynamics of social structure. Bateson's original account of Naven (1980) exemplifies this: his subtitle is 'a composite picture of the culture of a New Guinea tribe drawn from three points of view'. Each of these viewpoints illuminates different aspects of the Naven ritual and Iatmul society; each is incomplete in itself. Finally, the question of dynamics brings us to the temporal dimension (for all that Bateson's account is synchronic). Although we write from an epistemological starting point (as if the problem were imperfect knowledge of a fully defined world), recognizing incompleteness also leaves room for other ontologies. In particular, it is consistent with a view of the world as processual, as continually *becoming*; we stress that this is a realist view of that complicated world.

---

[3] In this context 'everything' is a weasel word. The argument we construct is couched in the language of epistemology: of the limitations of human knowledge of an independent world. If the ontology is somewhat different, so that rather than thinking of a complete world, independent of human thought, we think of a processual world in a continual state of becoming, then necessarily all human knowledge is, and always will be, incomplete, since the process never finishes.

[4] This is Reyna's approach (1997: 332-4 and 347): his agniological method seeks to identify (and then reduce) our ignorance, so he urges us to look for gaps and holes. This is likely to be humbling for practitioners.

[5] The term mereology is used in philosophy as a term for the 'formal study of the relations between parts and wholes' (OED2). This is particularly relevant to Durkheimian questions about the relation between individuals and society, and those between persons, body parts and memories (see Chisholm 1979 and Ruben 1983). As we argue below, merological anthropology is partial and honest about its

---

partialities. In another context Strathern (1992b: 72, 204) introduces the idea of merographics (partial analogies): 'the issue is the way ideas write or describe one another; the very act of description makes what is being described a part of something else e.g. the description' (1992b: 204); see also Franklin's recent elaboration (2003). The philosopher John Dilworth also discusses incompleteness and partiality of representations (e.g. 2003: 221-2).

The word *partial* is ambiguous, meaning both (1) incomplete and (2) biased. As explained below, both meanings are relevant to anthropology. First, consider the following three (invented) statements which are typical of much published academic work, anthropology included:

> The truth about Diana’s death is x.
>
> They said y happened, but what really happened was z.
>
> Dr W. gives a detailed and accurate account of social life among the Whomever.

Even the most enthusiastic post-modernists cannot avoid implicit references to truth. The impossibility recalls the hypothetical examination question: ‘“There is no such thing as truth”: answer true or false?’ Furthermore, whatever their own views, relativists have no reason to complain of *other* peoples’ concerns about truthful accounts or accurate representations, and should eschew such complaints as misleading or imperialist. In other words, anthropologists have no basis for imposing their relativism on realist others unless they themselves are laying claim to truth or to some other form of implicit realism. The paradox is unavoidable.

We suggest that anthropologists should aspire to produce faithful accounts, whose partiality is made explicit, having taken take steps to reduce it. The recognition that partiality cannot be eradicated does not exonerate us from attempting to minimize it. The inevitability of bias does not prevent an anthropologist from seeking to document partiality when it occurs. This applies both to our own partiality and to that of our informants. Hence, standard sociological research techniques remain helpful, providing warrants for our statements. Following these methods anthropologists are systematic. They do not believe everything they are told: they listen to everything everyone tells them and then try to make sense of the conflicts and contradictions between what different people say, and between what people say and what they do.

So we attempt to be faithful to what we are told and to ourselves, to our professional identities as observers and as social analysts. Unattainable? Yes. Inevitably tainted? Certainly! But ‘orientation’ is different from ‘arrival’ or ‘achievement’. This connects with the idea of ‘Partial Views’ and the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 160) who describe scientific metaphors as being *apt.*[6] The notions of aptness and faithfulness provide ways of evaluating accounts in the light of the available evidence. Aptness is susceptible to empirical testing, but the attraction of such an approach is that it assumes that all explanation has a metaphorical component which will be culturally constrained: ‘the very notion of the aptness of a metaphorical concept requires an embodied realism. Aptness depends on basic-level experience and upon a realistic body-based understanding of our environment’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 72-3; see also 228-32). Yet despite these cultural constraints, aptness is also linked to empiricism: a metaphor may or may not be apt, and we can seek evidence to help us make that judgement.

Ironically, the same point is made by Clifford, one of the most prominent anthropological post-modernists and hence usually assumed to be hostile to empiricism. But his talk of ‘representational tact’ (1986: 7) in the introduction to *Writing Culture* is wholly consistent with the idea of aptness or empirical responsibility.[7] As Brian Morris notes:

> What knowledge as representation does, however, is to make *explicit* what in fact is being affirmed (truths about the world), and acknowledges that all truth is intersubjective and thus open to critical scrutiny and possible refutation by other scholars (unlike truths which are apparently disclosed through evocation or mystical ‘revelation’ and which we are told have no reference at all to any world outside the text). With regard to anthropology, this affirmation of truth as representation is particularly important, for ethnographic accounts and anthropological theory should be open to scrutiny by the people whose culture and social life is being described and explicated (1997: 324, original emphasis).

Anthropology in the streets: Bootstrapping

‘Part of the post-modernist critique of anthropology has been that its methodology has been based on the double illusion of the neutral observer and the observable social phenomenon’ (Banks and Morphy 1997: 13). As stated above, for all its illusory nature the ‘neutral observer’ is an ideal worth aspiring to, since it encourages good practice and results in work that is more accessible for others to use and criticize. As for the concern about the observability of social phenomena, this is a classic case of inferring, from an inability to run, the impossibility of walking. Leaving philosophical and metaphysical questions of the existence of the world aside, at a very crude level events are observable, and patently these events constitute the social worlds we make. Actors observe each other and change their tactics and strategies accordingly. Mundane, everyday lives are full of observable events and interactions between people and objects. The objects are themselves the subjects of study. One of the ironies of late twentieth-century anthropology was that just when 'objectifying' people within the context of anthropological study was being portrayed as a 'Bad Thing' there was a simultaneous resurgence in the cultural study of objects themselves, now seen as having a social life (e.g. Appadurai (ed.) 1986) or as commodities (e.g. Miller (ed.) 1997). Thus objects emerged as legitimate subjects of study just when humans ceased to be so: an anthropology without *anthropoi*. The same fear of objectifying human social life has sometimes placed biological anthropology in a similar position. It is not, and cannot be, essentially racist to study biological aspects of human society, but to talk about different adaptations to local environments over millennia is to court instant rejection on the ground of political unsoundness. Safer by far never to consider any social question to which biology is relevant.

---

[6] See footnote 1 on page 6 above for definitional issues.

[7] See Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 134) on ‘empirically responsible philosophy’.

When it comes to observing events and interactions between people and objects, however, there is an odd disjunction or rupture between what anthropologists are told to do (the methodological and ideological strictures handed down to students) and what they and those who have instructed them do in their everyday life. Descartes wanted to put the existence of the world on hold in order to prove the existence of God. In the same spirit of radical scepticism anthropologists are told to put social life on hold until it can be proved that it is possible to understand other people: *philosophically*, that proof is not easily attained. But what Husserl called the 'natural attitude' (or 'lifeworld') typifies the philosophical insensitivity of everyday life. By and large, we do *not* question the existence of our children, colleagues, spouses, our cars and bicycles and their mechanics. We also behave as if utterances had meaning which, if not always immediately clear, can be easily clarified. It appears that such rough and ready, albeit philosophically and methodologically naive, attitudes are pervasive around the planet.[8] Our mundane lives are not conducted in a post-modern world. We live in a modern one (or, following Latour 1993, an amodern one).

To these prosaic (but in the light of contemporary theory, bizarrely radical) claims we add one further suggestion: that human actors in their everyday life have *anthropological* understandings of the world they live in. In order to be a competent adult social actor a person must gain some fluency in one or more dialects of one or more languages. In so doing they acquire not just a grammar but a social grammar of how words are to be used and to whom. They must learn how to comport themselves, how to hold their body, which bits of it to display when and to whom. They must learn which parts can be altered by surgery (through the insertion of metal, plastic, silicon or ink) and to whom they should admit this (the list could be continued). The models of understanding that people have of their fellow actors are essentially anthropological understandings, albeit unformalized, often unstated and rarely comparative. If it works on the street, why not in academe? Our understanding of our fellow citizens is imperfect, incomplete (partial), *and* partial to our points of view, but it works (more or less). It is adequate for our everyday lives, and by achieving that adequacy it passed a kind of test, repeatedly. The challenge for twenty-first century anthropology is to abandon the requirements of completeness and certainty for what, after Strathern (1992a), we call merological anthropology. We should keep trying to make explicit the complexity and systematicity, the inconsistency, clarity and vagueness of everyday understandings. Our accounts should be merological in recognizing their own partialities; depending on the rhetoric used, such recognition could be described as either scientific or post-modern. Anthropological accounts are partial in both senses: they are incomplete as well as biased.

---

[8] Hence the reference to bootstrapping in this section's title: we pull ourselves up by our bootstraps in ways reminiscent of Escher's impossibly circular drawings.

In what follows we hope to substantiate the general points outlined above. We intersperse our ethnography with reflections on some theoretical questions for sophisticated realism which are raised by the ethnography. Our ethnographies stem from three geographically and culturally disparate regions: Cameroon, Greece and Australia. The questions addressed below relate to: knowledge and belief (on the part of both the anthropologists and the locals); possibilities of cultural translation and cross-cultural understanding (without which anthropology could not proceed); and the attempt faithfully, albeit partially, to capture the reality of other peoples' lives. Some sections of the book are newly written for this volume; others have been published before in different forms (see Acknowledgements above). All have been modified for this book, which is not intended as a volume of collected essays. Rather, we have woven together material produced over a number of years into a continuous argument and a manifesto for a 'realist' anthropology, for the militants occupying the middle ground.

In Chapter 2 we discuss incompleteness as a form of realist account, which allows for other overlapping and complementing accounts, variously situated. There may still be disputes about ‘the facts of the matter’ but this is all to the good. To show that realism can include most of the social constructivist programme we consider some arguments for it, especially those associated with ethnomethodology. We also examine how aspects of the real world constrain how humans live and make objects.

Chapter 3 presents a fragment of ethnography from the Mambila in Cameroon. In some contexts people make empirical statements which are particularly challenging to their ethnographer. How to make sense of farmers who say that roosters lay eggs? Such statements are often invoked by those who hold that different cultural traditions ‘live in a different world’, an idea we criticize on several grounds in later chapters.

Chapter 4 shifts to a very different context, the south coast of Victoria, Australia, but takes up a closely related theme. Fishermen in Apollo Bay talk about and treat their boats as if they were human and female. The problem here is to give full weight to this discourse as something more than decoratively ‘metaphorical’ without falling into the trap of implying some metaphysic whereby the fishermen actually believe their boats to be women.

Chapter 5 presents some ethnographic vignettes in which the communicative processes at the heart of anthropological research could be characterized uncharitably as ‘telling lies’, but are better seen as the gross simplifications which start a process by which we pull ourselves up by the bootstraps to a more nuanced understanding.

Chapter 6 takes up the work of Pierre Bourdieu in the context of a small Greek village. Bourdieu’s rejection of ‘rules’ in accounting for social action and his emphasis on ‘practice’ might seem to place him squarely within a realist camp, but we argue that his formulation of *habitus* in itself creates an untenable entity whose ontological status is anything but clear.

Chapter 7 remains in Greece and examines the ethnography of Charles Stewart. Here the problem is almost the inverse of that presented in Chapter 3: it reprises the issue of seemingly untenable beliefs, but in this case it is Stewart’s informants who reject them or express extreme scepticism. Yet these beliefs still form part of the historical and cultural landscape of rural Greece. This points to the distinction between culture as a collective legacy and culture as the aggregate of ideas and beliefs to which people actually subscribe.

Chapter 8 considers the issue of translation, raised in Chapter 4, in greater depth. We argue that anthropological translation is importantly different from literary translation since we are not constrained by any requirement to match length. Confronted by a concept which ‘defies translation’, in other words which cannot be easily translated into the metropolitan language in which the anthropologist is writing, the ultimate recourse is to write an entire monograph explaining the range of nuance associated with the idea at stake, granting the reader the breadth of understanding that the researcher has gained.

Finally, in Chapter 9 we consider ways in which we can occupy a middle ground as realists who recognize the complexity of cultural construction within external constraints. This Chapter briefly discusses some forms of relativism and two different realisms: Roy Bhaskar’s ‘critical realism’ and Rom Harré’s ‘policy realism’. The ethnographic encounter makes us realists. Arguing for the middle ground makes us policy realists.

CHAPTER TWO

INCOMPLETENESS AND PARTIALITY

We suggested in the Introduction that a modest form of anthropological account is possible which acknowledges itself to be necessarily incomplete (and hence partial in one sense of the word). Such recognition does not prevent us from aspiring to accuracy, from seeking accounts which are both apt and as accurate as possible, even though claims of accuracy may be contested. Indeed the very possibility of challenge on the ground of having misunderstood or misleadingly presented a society requires an underlying realist premise. This we accept without being in any way obliged to endorse positivism or hard empiricism. We are happy to include in our realist accounts many forms of social life which would trouble positivists.

Grand illusions: Meaning after the fact of speaking

This section briefly explores some topics which are usually the concern of interpretive anthropologists and those sympathetic to relativistic arguments. This is partly to show that our form of realism is compatible with such interests, but also to show that more is publicly demonstrable than one may initially assume, and thus amenable to shared research and analysis. Empiricism and realism are not the same thing, but they are fellow travellers.[1]

One grand illusion that must be challenged is that people know what they are saying: that we, as actors have intentions that *are* meanings. We argue that intentions are different from meanings, that the meaning of an utterance is an interactional attribute that does *not* precede the utterance and its reception. Intentions (or goals) may be represented in many different ways, usually being inferred after the fact on the basis of actions (including the production of utterances).

To take language as the main communicative channel by which meanings are transmitted between people is misleading. This misconception is a consequence of taking writing, rather than conversation, as the prime model for language. Writing is a technological innovation that has become widely distributed, especially in recent time; but we must remember that for most of human history it was not available. The danger with taking writing as the exemplar of the relation of intention to meaning is that when writing we actually do craft sentences to express our desired meanings. Analysts such as Ong, Goody and Eisenstein[2] have written extensively about the cognitive and social effects of literacy. Our point is different: simply that writing presents a misleading model for understanding in global (and evolutionary) terms how meaning is created in ordinary human interaction. Sociolinguistics and especially ethnomethodologists show how linguistic meaning is often best seen as an emergent property, arising from, rather than pre-existing, the conversational interaction.

---

[1] Bhaskar's critical-realism is built on the distinction between an intransitive transcendental reality and our observations of it (e.g. 1998 esp. 26ff).

A parallel illusion in economic theory is that of the rational agent, the lonely maximizer. In a chilling article in the *London Review of Books* Donald Mackenzie (2002) reports how ordinary students behave normally (that is, *not* according to the norms of economics) except for those 'polluted' by economic theory who actually act according to its precepts, as 'rational maximizers'. This has terrifying implications since economics graduates are recruited by agencies such as the World Bank and IMF, so although economic theory *was* wrong as a model of the activity of human agents it may *become* correct when those schooled in its theories become the active agents in the world economy and act as they have been taught is proper.

The grand illusion shared by philosophy and anthropology is that of the author with a clear plan of what they want to write. The results may be problematic and in need of interpretation, but some are more needy than others. Examples abound, ranging from those beloved of speech act theorists ('I bet you'), through jokes ('A horse walked into a bar…') to poetry ('Should lanterns shine the holy face, caught in an octagon of unaccustomed light, would wither and any boy of love look twice before he fell from grace': Dylan Thomas). It is deeply misleading to assume that textual creation is a good model for face-to-face human interaction. All utterances are not equally problematic: the young child whining for food does not pose as complex an interpretative challenge as, for example, the public relations agent acting for a television celebrity. So too, some social generalizations are much easier to make than others. We can be much more confident that we have identified, for example, the economic basis of a given society than we can be about their attitudes to life after death.

---

[2] See Ong (1988), Goody (1977, 1986, 1987) and Zeitlyn (2001) for an overview of the implications of literacy debate. Eisenstein (1979, 1997) recasts the argument, emphasizing the role of printing. Street (1983) and Finnegan (1988) provide corrections to the more overstated versions of the 'great divide argument'.

A similar set of concerns can be raised about 'the self' which the Western tradition has historically treated as the essential core of and basis for personal identity. Against this, some authors have proposed 'positioning theory' as an alternative, in which the self is defined by its position in a social network and so is inherently relational. Much of the difference between positioning theory and its rivals lies in its abandonment of any attempt to essentialize the sense of self. So Linehan and McCarthy write: 'we define ourselves with respect to communities of practice as identity is constructed through negotiation of the meanings of our experience of membership in communities' (2000: 438). Selfhood on this account is not an individual attribute but a social accomplishment. Similarly, we propose that meaning lacks any essential core, that words really are, as Wittgenstein said, what we do with them. Such actions are not a matter for individuals in isolation: all actions are social actions (see Csordas 2004 and Das 1998). To look beyond, or to believe that is inadequate, is a literate illusion, foisted on the intellectual world by authors who mistake the written word for words spoken in conversation (de Certeau 1988). It is less the case that 'in the beginning was the word' than 'in the beginning was the exchange of words'. Meaning is a social achievement, not an individual assertion. This has wider implications. Rather than Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* we should have *disputamus ergo summus.*[3] In his reflections on the anthropology of religion, Clifford Geertz called this the 'autonomy of meaning thesis', which he summarized thus:

> Meaning is not a subjective matter, private, personal, 'in the head'. It is a public and social one, something constructed in the flow of life. We traffic in signs *en plein air*, out in the world where the action is; and it is in that trafficking that meaning is made. We must [...] 'mean what we say', because it is only by 'saying' (or otherwise behaving, acting, proceeding, conducting ourselves, in an intelligible manner) that we can 'mean' at all (2005: 6).

In a similar vein, although making a different point, Sperber (1982) talks of semi-propositional representations, grammatical expressions that do not have the same propositional force as others. Any propositional force they may have depends, not on the attitude of the speaker, but on the reception of their words by their interlocutors. It is what others do with those words rather than our intentions in speaking them that is important. We may say that Just is a good farmer, or that Zeitlyn can transform into a hippopotamus. The status of these utterances is determined by whether Just is invited to work parties, whether people inspect Zeitlyn for wounds when a hippopotamus is sick or wounded and whether he is accused of trampling fields in hippopotamus form. So the status of these utterances is not determined by what the speaker intends or what by any one listener understands, but by what actions follow the utterance. This has profound implications: as a general rule the status cannot be safely established in advance except by induction from previous utterances and it is conditional on the conditions of utterance, the audience and circumstances in which the phrase is uttered. In short, the meaning is determined *post hoc*, after the event. This removes or avoids the philosophical issue of 'the problem of meaning' or 'the' problem of meaning (the difference in emphasis points to the possibility of different approaches, and to the possibility of a resolution of the problem).

---

[3] Similarly Gergen contends that 'we may rightfully replace Descartes's dictum with *communicamus ergo sum'* (1994: viii).

To apply such an ethnomethodological solution to the problem is to abandon the philosophers' quest for certainty, the logicians' quest for decidability, the computational linguists' quest for an algorithm. Instead, in an alarmingly empirical fashion,[4] it is to examine mundane behaviour and focus on the way in which utterances are taken to be meaningful in ordinary, everyday usage. Most of the time most of us succeed in getting our meaning across. If we accept this and take it as our object of study then we abandon the search for MEANING and examine instead the everyday adequacy of lay understanding. Of course, this is anathema to many philosophers and to some anthropologists. In everyday conversation utterances are satisfactory; they are sufficient to the day. Such 'practical adequacy' for the task at hand provides ample matter for the analyst. The results of this style of analysis are widely applicable, and particularly germane to the central topics of anthropology. The result is a practical, workable anthropology. Crucially, it is oriented to the phenomena which surround us in fieldwork. This holds true whatever the focus of field research, be it beer, health problems, farming, sexual politics, tarot cards, in-vitro fertilization, virtual reality or whatever fashionable topic we choose. For what distinguishes anthropology[5] from other humanities, above all else, is the practice of fieldwork. Unlike the study of literature or history, anthropological research consists mainly of partial but incessant conversations, reflections on them in the light of both what we see happening and what happens next, as well as on theory gleaned from books (q.v. Gudeman and Rivera 1990). It is worth noting a further consequence: researcher and research-subject become inextricably connected along the way.

---

[4] Ethnomethodology's empiricism is alarming in its refusal to consider factors not demonstrably present in the immediate interaction. For example, in classic conversation analysis only the factors to which the speakers demonstrably orient themselves are considered. Many social scientists feel this misleadingly discounts stable, recurring factors which the parties bring to the interaction: in short, social structure.

What constitutes an ethnomethodological approach to meaning? It begins with an account of how the words at issue are used. Perhaps one witnesses an event and wishes to find out more. Or one may start with an elicitation frame and gather the vocabulary of a particular domain. Then, using the clues that this reveals, one can examine the situations in which those words or phrases are used. Of course, as anthropologists we may be sensitive to issues about who uses particular words and in what social context. To delve deeper we look for problems, disputes and communicational upsets and consider how they are resolved, the notion of repairs being central to the ethnomethodological programme (Schegloff 1977, 1992). By default, meaning is assumed, presumed, taken for granted.[6] We work on such assumptions until they are called into question (for example by a break in conversation) which causes us explicitly to address meaning and understanding. During conversational repairs meaning is publicly negotiated between co-conversants. Following the repairs, those involved have further grounds for their assumptions, which are then unlikely to be questioned in the next conversational round. Those grounds are practically adequate to the task at hand. Hence, meaning is emergent from the morass of social activity; in particular, it may be examined when problems occur. So anthropologists really are, or should be, looking for trouble. We are not only asking ‘what do you mean?’ but also concentrating on the points where disputes arise (about the correct conduct of a ritual, or who should inherit a field). Trouble spots are points at which meaning is contested. The resulting resolution of the problem is a (more or less temporary) consensus, even if it is only an agreement to disagree: it enables the disputants to move on.

---

[5] In Tim Ingold’s 2007 Radcliffe-Brown lecture he argued strongly for anthropology as a comparative discipline, comparing the results of individual ethnographies. The logic of his argument is that we should say *ethnography* (rather than anthropology) is distinguished by the practice of fieldwork. However, undertaking an ethnographic study remains a foundational qualification for anthropologists and this justifies the distinction as stated.

[6] This also means it can be uncertain and lack definition until/unless challenged, which is why we stress its emergent qualities.

From this perspective meaning is an emergent phenomenon of social interaction. On this view it is located, not in our heads, but in socially constructed space, in the interactions of social actors, of people (Geertz 2005). More importantly, it serves to orient our research practice to troublesome but mundane interaction, but now we can see why it has been so productive. To take an example from the study of ritual, consider Gilbert Lewis's (1986) transcript from a recording made during the construction of part of the Gnau *Panu'et* ritual in Papua New Guinea. The recording documents dissent about how the rite should be conducted. Through Lewis's analysis the conflicting voices give substance to our understanding of the rite and its meaning. Another example, from northern England, concerns neighbouring farmers Sid and Doris, discussed by Nigel Rapport (1983). Rapport portrays them constructing their relationship as they go about their everyday business. On our view, the anthropologist is handicapped by having less evidence than the participants, but it is evidence *of the same kind* as that used by Sid and Doris in constructing their representations of each other. The anthropologist has neither analytic nor authorial priority, and the possibility of criticism is reintroduced if enough material is published (or made available e.g. in data archives).

Much human interaction is unproblematic and not discussed. This can pose problems for analysts since it is never unambiguously clear what was meant or achieved.[7] Hence, our concern with smaller or larger points of disagreement where conflicting voices may give substance to our understanding. Trouble spots (disputes and arguments) are places where 'the everyday' and 'practical adequacy' diverge. In mundane, unproblematic life these terms cover the same ground in which children are fed and raised, crops grown, livelihoods achieved. Arguments reveal discrepancies between the understandings of the different parties about what is going on. Resolution marks an agreement (often tacit, and temporary) of a common workable understanding. It must be workable to enable people to pursue their shared social lives.[8] Disputes set limits for the possible interpretations of the case in point[9] and demonstrate in public the evolution of the interpretation that was achieved. Life goes on, including the talk and arguments that are part of it. The interpretations in question are primarily local, and may never be stated in words. They may also be those of an anthropologist, striving to make explicit the range of options within which social actions occur. This is what makes anthropological descriptions ‘thick’ (in Ryle’s sense (1971) as adopted later by Geertz (1973)): not just the action but the way in which it is understood locally.

---

[7] On which not only much fiction but also psychoanalysis rest.

[8] This is not to assume that 'the everyday' is a stable universal category: it is locally defined by what requires **no** comment and explanation, the social equivalent of the unmarked case in linguistics. In an extreme case, in the Tibetan

All utterances have degrees of illocutionary force, but their power cannot be assessed in advance. This is most clearly seen in arguments in court, where each litigant tries to convince the court of their cause. Many statements are made, most of them never pursued and their truth status never established. Afterwards only the analyst cares about these ‘loose ends’. The social world generally is constituted by a mass of talk, most of which is somewhat vague. However, in the jargon of ethnomethodology it is ‘practically adequate to the task at hand’: sufficient for ordinary speakers. It should then also be sufficient for analysts, but this has not been the case, largely because analysts have been beguiled by written texts. These have very different properties from spoken conversation, particularly in that they are crafted or composed in advance of reception. Conversational utterances are both the ephemera of everyday life and its most basic constituents.

Our base proposition is that any/every utterance is provisional, pending its reception, so at the time of utterance there can be no assumption of a fixed meaning, despite retrospective claims to the contrary. This has profound implications for both philosophy and anthropology. For example, the idea that the speaker enjoys privilege or priority, having unique access to what they really mean, is undermined. When such solipsistic pressure is removed a far more democratic and empirically robust anthropology and philosophy result. This provisionality is another form of the partiality or incompleteness that was discussed above as merological anthropology. We may be able to achieve confidence in our results, but speaking strictly, we can never be certain. Our knowledge even of the meaning of our own utterances is always incomplete, or partial.

We seek in this book to render problematic some assumptions common in European/ North American cultural and philosophical traditions. We

---

Buddhist monastery studied by Liberman (2004) debate and argument is part of the everyday!

[9] As illustrated over the *longue durée* by Bloch’s examination of the history of the Merina circumcision ritual (1986).

can then either re-examine and redo the old philosophy, or abandon it in favour of a new and different type of philosophy. Raising these questions makes human life (and anthropology) understandable by social analysts. If we want our analytic vocabulary at least to aspire to universality, then anything not consistent with partiality should be eschewed by our analytic terms of art. The universality of conversational structures has implications inconsistent with many philosophical positions.

The ethnomethodological argument is that conversational structure makes meaning a post-hoc, shared achievement. Meaning is public and social: not interior, private, nor pre-existing utterance. As a consequence the main Western philosophical programme based on intentions (and actions following from them) is misguided (despite our schooled intuitions to the contrary). Why is this? Conversational success sifts meaning out of the wide range of possible outcomes. Meaning is achieved post hoc: the speaker discovers what they mean in tandem with their co-conversants. A similar argument can be made for goal-driven behaviour. Intentions, like meanings, are realized only after the fact. They cannot then be used to explain those actions. The way we examine goal-directed behaviour needs a new analytic language.

On the conventional view intentions are language-like. One intention differs from another in the same way that one word differs from another: by virtue of its meaning, so the intentional objects are the meaning of words. For example, how do you know I am thirsty? Because I act, for example by saying ‘I am thirsty’ or ‘*Mì né méh núá*’ or simply by drinking a glass of water. I open my mouth and utter or I open my mouth and drink (sometimes one before the other). The argument about meaning and conversation applies *ipso facto* to intentions and actions. Actions are public and social and through them we (and others) learn what ‘our intentions’ are or were. So although we are familiar with the idea of *goal*-directed action we are not sure if the way we act is best characterized as a *meaning*-driven vocabulary of analysis.

Consider Marilyn Strathern’s ideas of partial/ partible personhood (1992a). Following the account first given by Leenhardt (1979 [1947]) Strathern paints a picture of fragmentary persons in which social relationships constitute individuals (dividuals) and in which a person comes into being through a mesh of relationships (and changes as that mesh changes). Strathern questions the Western philosophical tradition of the individual and hence the Cartesian programme. You can be certain that you exist but not that you are the same person who existed yesterday, let