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SPECIAL SECTION

Ethnography and intersubjectivity

Loose ends

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Throughout my various writing over the years I have advanced such notions as intersubjectivity, coevalness, and communication. In this essay I discuss and reflect upon these notions, from second thoughts to worries stemming from my own position in critical debates over the years. Specifically, I consider the relationship between epistemology and ethics and the question of methodological prescriptions in field research. In conclusion I ask whether today advocating for a school of critical anthropology is possible or even desirable. If so, one may ask the question: who is its adversary?

Keywords: ethnography, communication, intersubjectivity, epistemology

The invitation to the workshop for which this article was originally prepared came with a document that an old combatant in anthropology's postcolonial critical debates could not help but applaud. As a report on the state of the art it encouraged one to think that, a generation after we embarked on them, our struggles to find an alternative to positivism and scientism have been successful and that we may have managed to tie up a theory of ethnographic knowledge-production based on communicative interaction. However, it is still (or always) too early to celebrate victory in intellectual disputes. As the title of my contribution suggests, further work is needed because we are left with loose ends—conceptual and practical problems that are unresolved, among them some that may not be resolvable.

Here I want to offer a few thoughts for discussion by returning to key notions—intersubjectivity, coevalness, and communication—I worked with and helped to

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propagate. Some of them will be second thoughts that inevitably come up upon further reflection, others are prompted by worries I have expressed ever since I took a position in critical debates almost forty years ago. They concern the relationship between epistemology and ethics generally, and problems with deriving from epistemological insights methodological prescriptions or ethical rules for field research, specifically. It is perhaps also time to ask another general question: Is it possible or desirable to promote a renewed "critical anthropology" as a distinctive school of thought? And if critical once meant antipositivist where is the adversary today?

Scientific as opposed to what?

Let me respond to the second question—where is the adversary today?—with a few observations from the sidelines on current reincarnations of old disputes over whether or not anthropology is a science.

The vigorous battles between cultural materialists and symbolic anthropologists that, for a brief period in the seventies, enlivened the annual meetings of the AAA (with followers of Marvin Harris who were bent on *explaining* culture and those of Clifford Geertz who yearned for *interpreting* culture, plucking up courage to promote their views at the same time in different rooms of the conference hotel) are all but forgotten. Nowadays, when scientific anthropology is opposed to other kinds it is usually assumed that "scientific" suffices as a label for one side while the other may get called a dozen different names (and may in fact consist of a dozen different sides, including some that also claim to be scientific). One gets the impression that opting for one side or another is regarded a matter of temperament, of being tough- vs. soft-minded (and it is no secret that such a distinction often tacitly insinuates levels, not just kinds, of intelligence). Proponents may stick to opposing "scientific" to whatever, or whatever to "scientific," as if this were a rational, hence necessary, choice, knowing full well and even admitting that their own allegiance to one side or the other has been due to imponderable personal likes and dislikes, sheer biographic accident, and historical contingencies in the professional development of our discipline in different political and national contexts. If you add to this the debates, age-old but recently intensified, about the sustainability of the four-field institutionalization of anthropology in the United States (is it an ideology or a rational alliance imposed by an enterprise called the study of mankind?) and the movement of emancipation from Western hegemony that rallies around the idea of "World Anthropologies,"[1] searching for an adversary to the idea that ethnography must be an intersubjective enterprise begins to look like a hopeless undertaking. If this were just an expression of my own nostalgia for times when we knew whom to fight[2] I should apologize for taking you, however briefly, up this path. But I am not

1. See Segal and Yanagisako (2005) and Ribeiro and Escobar (2006).

2. And when we had targets such as Carl Hempel's essay on "Aspects of scientific explanation," the positivist manifesto that was on many social science reading lists (Hempel 1965), as well as programmatic statements of a counterposition (my own favorite was Habermas 1967).

ready to admit defeat in this matter. I do hope that we eventually can give shape to what we are for by stating clearly what we are against.

With these musings on the current whereabouts of positivism and scientism out of the way, I can now turn to a reexamination of intersubjectivity, coevalness, and communication.

Whence intersubjectivity?

When our predecessors spoke of savages, primitives, preliterate peoples without history and studied them with the aim to understand the rise of civilization, to confirm the working of natural laws of evolution, or to reveal patterns of the diffusion of culture we may assume that they did this without guile. Few would have been aware that the discourse to which these and similar designations and projects of inquiry belonged was an essential prop of imperial colonialism and if they were aware of the connection it would not have bothered them. They subscribed to the loftier ideals of Western expansion, among them the victoriousness of scientific objectivity.[3] History—political history to be precise—has taught us better but this did nothing to make the pursuit of ethnographic knowledge easier. Being scientific really got complicated when awareness of complicity between political power and scholarly inquiry made us realize that more was needed than following or improving on method or proper procedure. We had to think about epistemology, the conditions of possibility of producing knowledge. This was the context in which anthropologists took recourse to the notion of intersubjectivity.

Let me elaborate on my understanding of that event with assertions offered as recollections of one who was there when it happened. The term intersubjectivity belonged to the vocabulary of a current in philosophy known as phenomenology. It is well known that the reception of phenomenological thought in the social sciences, especially in sociology, our close relative, was part of an intellectual and political countermovement to the positivist "quantitative" heritage of that discipline.[4] It is doubtful, however, that intersubjectivity came to anthropology following the same trajectory. True, the phenomenological turn in sociology was more or less contemporary with the postcolonial epistemological crisis that led to calls for "critical anthropology," but overcoming a quantitative bias was not our problem and the initial impetus was quite different. Alfred Schutz, steeped in the phenomenological

3. For a critical account see Fabian 2000.

4. A field in which a radical reorientation went under the name of phenomenology was psychology (see the important essay by Campbell [1969]; he was a colleague at Northwestern University who encouraged me when I began to think about intersubjectivity). Ironically, few scholars and fewer students in the United States who embraced phenomenology had direct access to the largely German and French sources. By the time American publishers (above all Northwestern University Press) made sources and important secondary work (for example Natanson 1973) available in English, taking "phenomenological" approaches often meant, as we said jokingly, little more than doing sociology (or psychology) without statistics. Alfred Schutz was a key figure in proposals for a phenomenological turn in sociology (see Berger and Luckmann 1966).

tradition, was a key figure in sociology; in anthropology, Dell Hymes was a prime mover. In anthropology, intersubjectivity, or more precisely, the need for such a concept, was recognized and discussed when ethnographers who knew how important language was in their work began to contest the hegemony of Saussurian and Bloomfieldian approaches that guided Lévi-Straussian and other varieties of linguistic structuralism (among them "ethnoscience") and had a hold on theorizing and studying culture. Taking inspiration from Marxism, politically, and American pragmatism, philosophically, (hence the affinities to the Frankfurt School of critical theory) those who followed Hymes' call for an "ethnography of communication" (which, more fundamentally, was a call for "ethnography *as* communication") shifted attention from language as a system of signs to language as speaking, that is, as interpersonal acts and modes of communication.[5] These, I think, are the roots of the tree we set out to climb in our current debate.

The image of a tree to climb implies that sooner or later one gets to branches that reach out in different directions. Such branching took place almost immediately when Hymes' "ethnography of speaking" allied itself with, and some may say, mutated to, *sociolinguistics*, an academic discipline conceived as an alternative to formalist linguistics. The very success of sociolinguistics in establishing itself as a separate discipline made it very difficult for sociolinguistics to play in anthropology the metascientific role that Hymes had somehow envisaged for his ethnography of speaking.[6] Still, its influence in cultural anthropology grew in approaches that defined themselves as "language centered" and it is alive in the subfield known as "linguistic anthropology." I have been using these labels, the first one by choice (and sometimes widened to language- and text-centered), the latter imposed by academic bureaucrats, as self-designations during the years I worked in the Netherlands. I still call my approach language-centered because this describes best my theoretical preoccupations and daily labors as an ethnographer.

In retrospect one is tempted to see in these developments a case of disciplinary professionalization getting in the way of theoretical innovation. That is why I am no longer certain that our lack of success to establish a "linguistic" orientation in

5. Accuracy demands to note that intersubjectivity, the phenomenological term, did not figure prominently in the two seminal publications I have in mind. In the indexes of the collections of essays on the "Ethnography of communication," Gumperz and Hymes (1972) and Hymes (1974; the key essay "Toward ethnographies of Communication" was first published in 1962) "intersubjectivity" does not rate an entry and while the former acknowledges the influence of phenomenology with four bibliographic references to the work of Alfred Schutz (all of them cited in the paper by ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel) none appears in the Hymes' volume. Intersubjectivity did not make the index in Hymes 1974 although it figured prominently in Scholte's contribution to that volume; see also note 7 below.

6. I have often quoted (from memory) Hymes saying that sociolinguistics should be a self-liquidating discipline because its success in language studies in general would remove reasons for its existence as a special field. It sounded good then but is no longer likely to happen. He may have been right with regard to "critical anthropology" he helped to invent; except in the minds of some, and for a short time, it did not become a branch or subdiscipline.

Dutch anthropology (by giving it a recognized place in the teaching curriculum, set by law, and in the policies of research-funding) was an unequivocal failure. Quite likely, the language-centered work we produced only profited from not being pigeonholed in a "school" or subdiscipline.[7]

Intersubjectivity and ethnography

It became common in cultural anthropology to acknowledge the role of language and communication in fieldwork theoretically, that is, in ways that went beyond insisting on the practical importance of "speaking the language." However, it took a while before reflections on intersubjectivity in ethnography became the central issue they seem to be in this collection.[8] While I don't take credit for the latter I do feel obligated to show my credentials, as it were, as a contributor to the former. This will not be as easy as you may think.

In my first go at a nonpositivist conception of objectivity (Fabian 1971b, reprinted in 1991: chap. 1), I declared intersubjectivity the foundation of objectivity and language the medium by which ethnographic objectivity can be attained.[9] I also made it clear that this was not a top-down theoretical decision but an attempt to make epistemological sense of the ethnographic research I had just presented in my PhD dissertation on the Jamaa-movement (1971a). Ever since, I have maintained the bottom-up stance I assumed then and let my theoretical questioning be guided by field research and work with the documents it produced. I never took back the initial step, which was to invoke intersubjectivity, but the road I travelled eventually followed the signpost "language" and took me in directions I had not anticipated. The way I would tell the story now—stories can only be told now—the journey had several stages:

1. Initially I put my bets on two socio-linguistic projects. The first one was a study of the differentiation of genres of speaking in Jamaa discourse (Fabian 1974), the

7. When I say "our work" this is to acknowledge long-term cooperation with my late colleague and friend Bob Scholte who had left the United States for the University of Amsterdam a few years before I arrived there in 1980. We were first introduced to each other by Dell Hymes at the time when Hymes prepared his *Reinventing anthropology* ([1972] 1974, see Scholte's concluding essay in that volume).

8. See note 6 above on intersubjectivity not appearing in the indexes of important works on the ethnography of speaking. As an afterthought I checked the index of *Time and the Other* and was appalled when I found no entry under intersubjectivity—until I saw that the topic does occur, with numerous page references, under "Time, intersubjective."

9. In a way, that essay was an attempt to develop a casual remark—"ethnographic objectivity is intersubjective objectivity"—made years earlier by Dell Hymes (1964: 14). A less casual statement I found in his important essay on linguistic method in ethnography: "True objectivity lies in discovering the intersubjective objectivity of the symbolic forms, the cultural systems, participated in by those one is studying" (1970: 281). Both point to Durkheim rather than Husserl, that is, to a sociological concept of intersubjectivity that is compatible with the positivism I criticized in "Language, history, and anthropology" (1971b).

second one an ambitious study of the use of Swahili in the context of industrial and artisanal work.

2. Next came *Time and the other* (1983), not a book on time in general and not at all on cultural conceptions of time but a confrontation of what I saw as a contradiction between ethnographic practice and anthropological discourse. Leaving behind inquiry into rules of communication (and hence of ethnography) I now concentrated on the theoretical implications of Hymes' notion of "speech events." If communication, the practice we had recognized as central to ethnography, came in events what was the nature of such events? They happened, that is, they took place in time. If they were events of communication they could not have happened unless the participants shared time and sharing time could not have occurred unless the participant in the events recognized each other as coeval, cotemporary. The contradiction I explored in the book was the one between recognition of coevalness in field research and its systematic denial in anthropological discourse. Could that contradiction be resolved? I formulated a few suggestions in the conclusion of *Time and the other* but now the pressure was on to "put up or shut up" in my subsequent work.

3. At about the same I completed the manuscript of *Time and the other* (in 1978, five years before it was published) I took leave of sociolinguistics with a paper on the irruption of time (a phrase coined by Michel Foucault) in communication, based on a discovery I had made in the midst of my work with Swahili-speaking workers.[10] Then came numerous papers, most of them (re)published in three collections of essays, three ethnographies, and two historical studies that I will not even try to summarize here. A short (and selective) list of topics that occupied me will give you an idea where further exploration of temporality and cotemporality took me over the years.

To begin with, thinking about copresence as a condition of ethnographic research inevitably leads one to reflect on ethnographic *presence* and this opened a new angle on the much-debated problems of *re-presentation* in anthropological writing. When we call both, our research projects and their publication, "ethnography" this is conceptually muddled talk but it does reflect a fact: production of ethnography is not a unidirectional process, it works (starting at the moment when we take notes or make texts based on recordings) from both ends, research and writing.

Already when I first stated that language is "the one medium" that establishes contexts of communicative ethnography[11] I sensed a problem. Somehow, language was both too broad and too narrow a concept to catch what is involved in ethnographic communication. Among the many directions I could have gone from there (by considering nonlinguistic, proxemics, or bodily communication, and so forth) there was one that imposed itself practically when I worked with a group of popular actors who made me discover the theoretical significance of *performance*. This experience made me call for taking a step from communicative to performative ethnography, which, I would insist, was not a step away from the starting point but a move toward its core and a deeper understanding of time and timing in ethnographic research, one that could give a more precise meaning to the idea of coproducing knowledge.

10. See Fabian 1979 (reprinted in 1991: chap. 5).

11. This was the "second thesis" in Fabian 1971b (reprinted in 1991: chap.12).

Next on this list should be theoretical moves that also started with a certain discontent, in this case with coevalness, the neologism that had allowed me to conceptualize the sharing of time between participants as a condition of ethnographic communication. If I wanted to take this epistemological insight to the level where it counted—our discourse about the people we study—then it also required rethinking our object of inquiry, other cultures and societies, as *contemporary* (not just in the vague sense this term often has but as *co*temporary, living in the same time as we do).[12] The rhetorical strategy I chose in pursuing this idea was to propose "popular culture" as a counterconcept to culture *tout court*. In separate research projects I had studied religious enthusiasm, local Swahili, grassroots historiography, genre-painting, improvisational theater, and was at least aware of omnipresent Congolese music. In popular culture I found a theoretical frame that made it possible to present my findings as contemporary creations rather than as epiphenomena arising somewhere between an African tradition that was no longer and a Western modernity that was not yet.

Finally, continued struggle with translating a theoretical concept of intersubjectivity into ethnographic practice—and everything that can be said about presence and copresence notwithstanding—made me consider *memory*. In *Time and the other* I had said that, in order to be knowingly in each other's present we must share each other's past—"somehow." Already in the seventies we had approached Shaba genre painting as a regime of collective memory. It took another twenty years, beginning with *Remembering the present* (1996) right up to an experiment with ethnographic writing from the virtual archive (Fabian 2008) before memory and remembering—always related to the questions of presence and copresence, present and past, identity and alterity—became dominant themes (Fabian 2007).

What intersubjectivity is not

The point of this retrospective on my work is this: Acknowledging intersubjectivity as a condition of possibility of communicative research enabled us to conceive an alternative to a positivist view of ethnographic objectivity. An epistemological alternative was needed not so much because positivist premises (theory) and practices (methodology) of knowledge production proved unworkable (many

12. A recent paper by Kevin Birth (2008) is critical of "coevalness" and the critique of allochronism. His concern is the "danger of homochronism," the denial of the fact or the possibility (which of the two?) that others live in other times. Though I think he starts with a misunderstanding (culturally different ways of thinking about, and experiencing, time were not the subject of *Time and the other*) many of his observations are worth pondering in discussions such as ours—as is a statement about coevalness in the Conclusion of *Time and the other* that Birth seems to have missed: "If it meant the oneness of Times as identity ["homochronism"], coevalness would indeed amount to a theory of appropriation (as, for instance, in the idea of *one* history of salvation or *one* myth-history of reason). As it is understood in these essays, coevalness aims at recognizing co-temporality as the condition for truly dialectical confrontation between persons as well as societies" (2002: 154).

long-established methods are still useful) but because they were incapable of justifying anthropological research in field situations that changed radically when our discipline could no longer be exercised in a colonial and imperial state of affairs (when, in fact, it lost its traditional object, the primitive, the native, the tribe, and so forth).

Fine, you may say if you have followed me so far, but what *is* intersubjectivity? If forced to give a direct answer I am afraid I can only repeat Augustin's response to "What is time?": "If no one asks me about it, I know; if I want to explain it to the one who asks, I don't know" (*Confessions*, book XI). What I can do is say a few things about what I think intersubjectivity in our thinking about ethnography is not. To begin with, the concept is not a straight import from phenomenology.[13] We are anthropologists, not philosophers. To struggle with the concept as, say, Husserl did would be a burden we could not carry and still do the work that can be expected of us. Furthermore, when the philosophical authorities on intersubjectivity developed the concept they did not, as far as I can see, face the problem we have. They thought about relationships between subjects who share their *Lebenswelt*; our task is to figure out how we can produce knowledge by bridging *Lebenswelten*. Still, we can avoid resigning ourselves to using intersubjectivity as a mere homonym of the philosophical term (same word but different meanings) if we preserve its epistemological signification, which encourages me to proffer further statements on what intersubjectivity is not.

Let me start with the one I find easiest to make. Intersubjectivity is not an ethical concept. It is not a prescription for moral conduct. When we qualify it as condition of communication we must never lose sight of the fact that communication is not unequivocally positive (even Habermas who likes to invoke "power-free communication" knows that this is an ideal rather than a reality). Dialogue, arguably a softer version of intersubjectivity much debated in our discipline, can be manipulative and deceptive; selective emphasis, secretiveness, withholding information, and outright lying are also forms of communication and dialogue made possible by intersubjectivity. Doing communicative ethnography is not going one better, ethically, on positivist approaches; it is a practice that imposes itself epistemologically. Being truthful and nonmanipulative I consider personal virtues and how to get from epistemology to professional ethics has remained, among others, a loose end in my thought about ethnography.

A caveat applies to another insight that was ultimately derived from the idea of intersubjectivity: The premise that takes researchers and researched, the ethnographer and his or her interlocutors to be coproductive of knowledge should not be confused with, or weakened to mean, conducting fieldwork cooperatively. If the idea of intersubjectivity precludes hierarchical relationships between subjects and if coproducing knowledge means that producers face each other at eye level, ethnographic research involves confrontation, a struggle for recognition.[14]

13. See also Duranti 2010.

14. See my attempts to show how this view of collaboration as confrontation may extend to writing, for instance in an ethnography of the oeuvre of a Congolese popular painter and historian (Fabian 1996).

I can be brief about one final entry on this list of statements about what intersubjectivity is not. It regards the temptation to think of, and talk about, intersubjectivity as but a fancy term for participant observation, that is, as a "method." Our eyes glaze over when, in student paper after student paper, research proposal after research proposal, we are told that participant observation (and often little else) is the chosen methodology of a project. Even worse, it is distressing to find this repeated whenever researcher in fields from industrial sociology to cultural studies, with acknowledgments to anthropology, turn to ethnography as a "method" of inquiry.

Conclusion

Loose ends may be more or less serious and some we can just keep dangling. Philosophers have a technical term, *aporia*, literally no way (out),[15] an appropriate designation for a problem with intersubjectivity I now want to end with. Claude Lévi-Strauss started and Victor Turner ended with a notion that made intersubjectivity a natural condition, grounded in the neurophysiology of the human brain. When we communicate we can think alike because we are built alike. That would mean that intersubjectivity is a given and that is precisely the view I reject. Repeatedly I stated that, like coevalness, intersubjectivity must be made or achieved, opening myself to misunderstandings or getting embroiled in contradiction. When philosophers postulate intersubjectivity they escape contradiction by declaring it a "transcendental" category.[16] Anthropologists/ethnographers, I am convinced, must invoke intersubjectivity in their attempts to understand their practices of empirical knowledge production. So far, I have not been able to put the transcendental and the pragmatic meanings of intersubjectivity together. That is my *aporia*. The consolation I have is that an *aporia* tells you how far you got, not how far you can get.

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15. For definitions see http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=1578.

16. See Husserl on "transcendental intersubjectivity." Transcendental: a concept/form of thought that is needed for the production of empirical knowledge but cannot be produced as empirical knowledge.

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Ethnographie et intersubjectivité: questions non résolues

Résumé : À travers mes divers écrits au cours des années, j'ai promu des notions telles qu'intersubjectivité, co-temporalité et communication. Dans cet essai, je discute et réfléchis à ces notions, à partir des doutes et des craintes issus de ma propre position dans les débats critiques au fil des ans. Plus précisément, je traite de la relation entre l'épistémologie et l'éthique et de la question des prescriptions méthodologiques dans la recherche sur le terrain. En conclusion, je demande si plaider aujourd'hui pour une école d'anthropologie critique est possible ou même souhaitable. Si c'est le cas, on peut se poser la question : qui serait l'adversaire ?

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