Back to Culture! Anthropology in the Wake of Said, Clifford, and Anti-Relativism

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The 1990s, when I attended graduate school, was a great moment of self-reflection in Anthropology. Edward Said's claim that knowledge about the Orient constituted a system of representations, constructed in relation to the West as that which is alien, continued to reverberate. One of Said's inspirations, Michel Foucault, had written vividly about the invented quality of certain Victorian truths—the passions, the self, even madness. And Jim Clifford, a historian of anthropology, was exploring the colonial context of anthropological knowledge, showing how cultural truths were accessed and shaped by the power inequalities between ethnographer and informant.

It was a moment which left the field markedly changed: anthropologists increasingly left behind the method of "immersion" in favor of more transnational, multi-sited approaches. "The field" became merely a figure of speech—no place, no matter how remote, was any longer thought to be disconnected from the workings of global capital and culture. And studies of industrialized settings, including the U.S., grew and gradually gained legitimacy in the field.

All of these changes have been productive—the paradigm shift was necessary. And yet, at times I feel that the question of how to get on with studying "the other," as Said would put it, continues to haunt the discipline of anthropology, the humanities, and perhaps social thought more broadly. We've become too circumspect in our statements about culture. When we as anthropologists go somewhere and record our observations, what can we say we have learned? How can we be sure that our observations do not reflect our own presuppositions more than lived reality for our informants? When is culture "real" and when is it imposed ideology? We must be cognizant of fissures and transformations, avoiding such statements as "The Japanese are," "The Japanese believe," for fear of reducing culture to imagined essences.

The task seemed daunting as I wrote and re-wrote drafts of my first book, concerning Japan's era of rapid economic growth and its demands on the family. My ethnographic window was the problem of alcohol and heavy drinking among salarymen, and the response on the part of public clinics to treat and train families to cope with it. Japanese clinics had embraced American popular psychology, and regarded the services that wives regularly provide to their husbands as enabling or "codependent" behavior. Although the women took a considerable degree of pride in the work they were doing to maintain a harmonious home and to make sure that their husbands remained productive workers despite heavy drinking, they were told to take a "hands-off" approach. *Codependent No More*, the popular best-seller which has been translated into Japanese, listed "needing to be needed," and defining oneself through relationships with others as unhealthy qualities associated with low self-esteem.

And yet, this was the heyday of the Japanese housewife, when women were subsidized to stay at home. The domestic sphere was not a "private sphere" in the Western sense but a space of quasi-civil service. Work at home, although non-paid, was nonetheless considered productive work. What I eventually realized, and what I believe allowed me to write a richer book, was that this was not an example of women passively absorbing Western culture and abiding by it. Nor was my job to expose the oppressiveness of the gender system in Japan—this was easily perceived by my American colleagues. What needed explaining was rather why the intelligent, thoughtful women who were my informants found being a housewife in Japan compelling. In fact, to engage with the very idea of codependency, the women in the support groups I studied had turned the notion on its head. To them, the idea that caring was a pathological tendency was counter-intuitive. Sacrifice, endurance, and coping were justifiable aspects of the postwar social contract. Codependency was "normal," even virtuous at moments, even if it did need to be reined in at times.

Once I could accept this view, the conversations offered an interesting reflecting glass to the deep assumptions underlying the original, American ideas of codependency: the fetishization of the wage as the key to women's independence; the notion of social obligation as an intrusion into the self; the privileging of romantic love as the basis for family rather than parenting, or partnership. The lesson for me was that, despite my graduate training and my sensitivity to Western cultural domination, real differences underlay the way in which women approached their husbands' alcoholism. In other

words, one path leading away from the post-colonial dilemma was that, beyond showing how cultural belief systems are produced ideologically, one must, in addition, tackle those differences at face value, reveal their internal logic, and somehow lead the reader to see how such radically foreign belief systems could be compelling to the actors within them, however counter-intuitive they might otherwise appear. The project required a return to the more traditional project of "cultural relativism" as at least one component of a broader theoretical framework.

At the memorial service I recently attended for Clifford Geertz at the Institute for Advanced Study, one speaker repeated one of Geertz's characteristically vivid remarks on the subject of difference: that one "has to be parochial in order to be cosmopolitan." It is this process of coming to terms with radical otherness and seeing its logic that I believe we shy away from in anthropology and area studies these days. The skepticism about approaching the other has led to the thinning of support for area studies as an academic priority; and many anthropology departments see themselves as post-area. Social theory is the primary text they are teaching. Culture is "data." A faculty member in each geographic area is now an outmoded way of structuring a department.

In my current project, supported by the Charles A. Ryskamp Fellowship, I am focusing on the role of Japan in American anthropology as a critical reflecting glass for American liberalism and individualism: Japan's status as the first non-Western industrial power positioned it in a particular way: as a highly productive, industrious, and educated society, but also one with radical cultural differences. Of course this approach to Japan was

riddled with problems of the Orientalist type, but still I often wonder if the problems lay less in our exoticization of the Japanese but rather in often *underestimating* their differences.

Japanese intellectuals beginning in the late nineteenth century struggled to come to terms with what it could mean to embrace Western technology, capitalism, and the values of liberalism and democracy, which were an affront to their Confucian-based system. By the 1930s there was a full-scale rebellion against these values among intellectuals, who juxtaposed Western technology with Japanese subtlety, communalism, morality, and spirit. Watsuji Tetsurô, one of the eminent philosophers of the day, wrote in 1944 that the "American National Character" thrives on innovation and competition, but that beneath these drives lies a moral vacuum. If you want to understand what makes Americans happy, he wrote, it is the desire for intense stimulation and "the expulsion of energy to the point of collapse" *(chikara o dashikitte guttari suru).* The bankruptcy of individualism and mass democracy, in which individuals organize their lives by contracts and artificial relationality, in contrast with the rich familiality and decentering of self in Japan, was a continual theme of Watsuji's writings. Americans come to Asia, seeking to conquer the world with "quantity" (*ryô),* he wrote in the concluding passage of the essay, but what awaits them after that is a "nervous breakdown" (480).

Throughout the war, the U.S. maintained a consistent interest in studying Japanese "difference," if only to defeat the enemy. In Ruth Benedict's famous postwar ethnography, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword,* she capitalizes on this difference,

continually shining the reflecting glass back towards the U.S. Americans deplore the inequality lurking in the Japanese reverence for hierarchy. And yet these same Americans see it as entirely logical that the factory worker's daughter has a corn-cob doll while the factory owner's daughter has one made from cloth. Benedict's unabashed exploration of the otherness of the Japanese also allowed her to humanize them, and then to turn the mirror on the unquestioned logic of American capitalism itself.

The vision of cultural relativism preached by Benedict, Mead and others in the inter-war years advocated the coming to terms with the internal cultural logic: an "open-mindedness" towards "that which one would not have been able to guess," as Mead had written. While I do not wish to return to the days of Benedict's cultural relativism and its excesses, I often wonder if there was not a healthiness in this ability to confront and accept "radical otherness."

Recently I came upon a special issue of *Fortune* on Japan, published in 1944, as the American government was readying for the occupation. The issue was striking, first, for the in-depth knowledge it displayed about the Japanese. Despite being riddled with racist language and wartime fervor, the writers got it right about many aspects of Japanese society. It was also striking for its appraisal of the pressing question facing the U.S. in 1944: what will we do with Japan after victory? To mold it into a nation which can function among democracies is a daunting undertaking, the article notes. We will have to effectively "redo political and economic institutions, decide the imperial succession, set up tribunals, break up patriotic societies…and reshape the entire education system." "As

for ‘liberal’ groups in Japan,” the article continues, “there are Japanese who disapprove of Army control of their purses and dictatorship of the country; but there are almost none who genuinely disapprove of the war and certainly none who want us to run the country for them” (182).

Although the United States ultimately decided to pursue just such a totalizing course, one can contrast that moment of hesitation in *Fortune* with our current government’s naïve and dangerous assumption that beneath any regime, however segmented or autocratic, lies a liberal democracy waiting to flourish. The American administration which occupied Japan from 1945 to 1952 was perhaps comparable to the current administration in its unquestioned confidence in the supremacy of American values and American democracy. And yet the occupiers of Japan were strikingly ambitious and thorough in their endeavor to instill a new language and culture of democracy, stopping not at mere regime change but sending civil divisions of the occupying forces into villages to found girl scout troops, bolster women’s associations, teach about equality in the home, and train citizens groups in matters of democratic procedure—motions, voting, and the rule of the majority rather than deferral to superiors (see Johnson 1986). [1]

Recent studies have suggested that wartime anthropology shaped the postwar climate in which the U.S. government could contemplate (and ultimately enact) the decision to restore the Japanese emperor as a symbolic figurehead of the nation in the aftermath of

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[1] Carmen Johnson, *Wave Rings on the Water: My Years with the Postwar Women of Japan.* Charles River Press.

Japan's defeat. The decision has been evaluated retrospectively as pragmatic by some and irresponsible by others. And yet it is difficult not to reflect on it once more in the wake of recent events in Iraq—in particular the failed attempt in 2005 to install the Western educated Washington insider, Ahmed Chalabi as Prime Minister—a man who was known by some members of the administration as "The George Washington of Iraq"—and yet who possessed little legitimacy as a leader among Iraqi people themselves.

What I'd like to tell my graduate students after reading Said, Clifford, and others, is that culture and difference are not merely ideology: culture is a language, an important one, that allows people to explain to themselves and to one another who they are or who they want to be. These languages are laden with fissures and frayed bits. They are ripe for contestation. And they are never "primordial" but historically shaped and maintained. Still, we cannot be too quick to dismiss them, because they are the only window we have into the beliefs of our informants.

In this respect it is heartening to learn that the American Council for Learned Societies is giving 25% of its fellowship funds for the study of cultures outside of Europe and North America. I hope that the ACLS can continue to assert the importance of that mandate—knowledge of self through knowledge of other, as [ACLS President] Pauline Yu eloquently put it. Indeed it would be unfortunate and ironic if this productive moment of self-reflection culminated not in cosmopolitanism through parochialism, as Geertz had hoped, but in parochialism in the guise of cosmopolitanism.