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# Postmodernist Anthropology, Subjectivity, and Science: A Modernist Critique

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Central to the postmodern project in anthropology is its critique of science and the scientific method, a critique which it shares with (because it was borrowed from) postmodernist thought more generally. However, unless otherwise specified, in what follows the terms *postmodernist* and *postmodernism* will refer to postmodernist anthropology specifically, not to postmodernism more generally. (For a superb survey of the history of postmodernist thought in general, see Harvey [1989], especially chapter 3.)

The postmodernist critique of science consists of two interrelated arguments, epistemological and ideological. Both are based, however, on the central postmodern notion of subjectivity. First, because of the subjectivity of the human object, anthropology, according to the epistemological argument, cannot be a science; and in any event the subjectivity of the human subject precludes the possibility of science discovering objective truth. Second, since its much-vaunted objectivity is an illusion, science, according to the ideological argument, serves the interests of dominant social groups (males, whites, Westerners), thereby subverting those of oppressed groups (females, ethnics, third-world peoples).

Since both of these arguments stem from the central emphasis that postmodernists place on subjectivity, my primary concern in this essay<sup>1</sup> is to assess the postmodernist interpretation and use of that critical concept. Hence, in what follows I shall do three things. First, I shall summarize those claims of the postmodernist view of subjectivity which, in my view, are valid. Second, I shall argue that although valid, these claims are not new, having been innovated many years ago by the founders of the Culture and Personality movement. Third, I shall argue that the postmodernist innovations have unfortunate consequences for anthropological scholarship.

<sup>1</sup> A short version of this essay was presented to the Symposium on Postmodern Subjectivities at the 1993 annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, organized by Claudia Strauss and Takie Lebra. I am indebted to David Jordan, Marc Swartz, and Donald Tuzin for their helpful criticisms of earlier drafts.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SUBJECTIVITY

Postmodernists (like symbolists and interpretivists) stress that the understanding of persons and groups requires an understanding of their meanings—and I agree with them. Moreover, since the anthropological investigator is an actor in a social field that includes both himself and the natives, postmodernists also stress, correctly in my view, that field work is dialogical; that the anthropologist not only observes the natives but is also observed by them; and that anthropological data are not produced by the anthropologist's action alone nor consist of the natives' actions alone but, rather, are produced by, and consist of, the interaction between the anthropologist and the natives.

But if the anthropologist, among other things, investigates meanings and if meanings are found in the psyches of persons, then it follows, postmodernists correctly stress, that the anthropologist must attend to subjectivity. Moreover, since field work is a two-directional, not a one-directional enterprise, it also follows, they emphasize, that the anthropologist must attend to the subjectivity not only of the natives (the human object), but also his own (the human subject). Once again I agree with them.

I agree with all of the above propositions not, however, because like Kant, who claimed to have been awakened from his philosophical slumber by reading Hume, I was awakened from my anthropological slumber by reading the postmodernists. Rather, it is because much before the advent of postmodernism, I had read Freud and Sapir, Mead and Benedict, DuBois and Kardiner, Hallowell and Devereux, Erikson and Kluckhohn, and the other founders of the Culture and Personality movement for whom the subjectivity both of object and subject was a truism. ("Historical truth," Appell has written, "appears to be the first casualty of the battle over the soul of anthropology" [1992:196], quoted in Lewis [1994]).

## CULTURE AND PERSONALITY

*The Subjectivity of the Object*

Arguably, Freud was the inspiration for the founders of the Culture and Personality movement. That inspiration, however, came not from his anthropological but his psychological work, which consistently emphasized that what was critical to the elucidation of actors' ideas, beliefs, and values is an understanding of their intentions, desires, and wishes, in short, their meanings (unconscious as well as conscious). Indeed, one of Freud's revolutionary innovations is his claim, first published one hundred years ago (Breuer and Freud 1893), that even seemingly meaningless phenomena (such as neurotic symptoms, dreams, and parapraxes) are meaningful and that the task of the analyst is to discover their meanings.

Two decades later, Freud introduced his second revolutionary contribution to the understanding of the subjectivity of the human object: the process of “transference” (Freud 1912). Although Freud himself was mainly concerned with this process in the context of the analyst–patient relationship, later social theorists extended its application to other emotionally significant relationships, including the anthropologist–native relationship. With some few exceptions, however (for example, Devereux 1951; Gladwin and Sarason 1953), transference was rarely considered in early Culture and Personality studies, nor with some notable exceptions (for example, Crapanzano 1980; Ewing 1987; Kracke 1978; S. LeVine 1981) is it emphasized in contemporary psychological anthropology.

If Freud was the grandfather of Culture and Personality, then Edward Sapir was clearly its father. Like Freud, whose psychology he took as his model, Sapir emphasized that the individual and his subjectivity—he used the term personality—was absent from the anthropology of his time. Thus, as early as 1932, Sapir emphasized that culture patterns “cannot be realistically disconnected from those organizations of ideas and feelings which constitute the individual” because

the true locus of culture is in the interactions of specific individuals and, on the subjective side, in the world of meanings which each one of these individuals may unconsciously abstract for himself from his participation in these interactions” (Sapir 1932, in Mandelbaum 1957:151).

To offer only one more example, as early as 1938 A. I. Hallowell, who acknowledged the influence of both Freud and Sapir, began to publish a series of articles on Ojibwa subjectivity (Hallowell 1938). Nevertheless, Hallowell’s influence was not felt beyond the small circle of Culture and Personality specialists until the 1980s, when his pathbreaking article on the self (though published three decades earlier) was discovered by a new generation of anthropologists. In this article, Hallowell argued *inter alia* that while “culture-centered” ethnographies were valuable for both “comparative and analytic” purposes, still

of necessity the material is presented from the standpoint of an outside observer. Presented to us in this form, these cultural data do not permit us to apprehend, in an integral fashion, the most significant and meaningful aspects of the world of the individual as experienced by him and in terms of which he thinks, is motivated to act, and satisfies his needs (Hallowell 1954:79).

It should be noted, moreover, that Hallowell was not content to rely on empathy and insight alone for elucidating the “meaningful aspects of the world” of individual actors. Consequently, he pioneered the anthropological use of the Rorschach test as a means for obtaining an objective assessment of their subjectivity, one that could make possible more precise cross-group comparisons. In this regard, however, he influenced only a few of his contem-

poraries, the others arguing that projective tests were culture-bound, and hence not suitable for the investigation of non-Western groups.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Subjectivity of the Subject*

Freud, who once again is the pioneer figure, first emphasized the importance of the subjectivity of the subject—in this case, the analyst—in his concept of “countertransference” (1910). Viewing the analyst’s countertransference as a formidable obstacle to objectivity, he stressed the paramount importance of self-reflexivity as a means for dealing with this obstacle. (Since he believed it highly unlikely, however, that anyone is capable of the kind of self understanding with the honesty that genuine self-reflexivity requires, Freud [1937] recommended that every analyst undergo a personal analysis as well as a periodic self-reflexive reexamination.)

Beginning, however, in the 1950s, psychoanalysis came to view countertransference not only as an obstacle to objective understanding but also (if properly understood and dealt with) as an important instrument for such understanding (Tyson 1984). In this regard, the psychoanalysts’ stress on self-reflexivity, like that of the psychological anthropologists discussed below, is very different from that of many postmodernists who also stress its importance (for example, Ruby 1982). For while the former two deploy their countertransference in the service of understanding the object (patients and non-Western peoples, respectively), the latter—or at least some of them—deploy it instead in the service of their own “self-growth” (for example, Marcus and Fischer 1986:ix–x; Rabinow 1977).

Despite the influence of Freud, early Culture and Personality researchers seem not to have attended to the role of countertransference in anthropological field work, at least not explicitly. Indeed, so far as I can tell, the first ethnographic investigation to attend explicitly to countertransference is Gladwin and Sarason’s nuanced study of Trukese personality (Gladwin and Sarason 1953). Unfortunately, this admirable study was still-born, perhaps because of its heavy use of projective tests, and has been neglected ever since. This was not the fate, however, of another early, but highly influential, work which (though not explicitly psychological nor even, in the strict sense of the term, ethno-

<sup>2</sup> It is a safe bet, I dare say, that few of these critics had a first-hand acquaintance with these tests nor with the anthropological studies that employed them, including DeVos (1954) DuBois (1944), Gladwin and Sarason (1953), Hallowell (1955: ch. 3), Henry (1947), Spindler (1955), Wallace (1952). Rather, they relied for the most part on secondhand reports of Lindzey’s assessment (Lindzey 1961) which had demonstrated, so the critics alleged, that these studies produced neither valid nor reliable findings. In fact, however, Lindzey, a clinical psychologist, said nothing of the kind, although his balanced assessment of these studies dealt with their weakness as well as their strengths.

In any event, as a consequence of the uniformed views of the early critics, only few contemporary fieldworkers (see DeVos and Boyer 1989; Suarez-Orozco 1989) continue to employ projective tests; and anthropology, at least in my view, has lost a valuable opportunity to establish objective, inter-group psychological comparisons. (For a similar view, see Schwartz [1992:338–40].)

graphic) dealt even more extensively with the anthropologist's countertransference. I am referring, of course, to *Tristes Tropiques* (Lévi-Strauss 1955).

More recently, a variety of anthropologists have discussed their own countertransference reactions in field work with admirable honesty and courage. Here, I would mention especially the studies of L. Bohannon [Bowen] (1964), Briggs (1970), Crapanzano (1980), Kracke (1987), Read (1967) and R. Rosaldo (1984). From the evidence of all these works, as well as my own field-work experience, I would suggest that the countertransference reactions of field anthropologists, like those of clinical analysts, stem from their anxieties, inner conflicts, loneliness, investment in favorite theories, personal values, professional ambition, and so forth.

It was Devereux who, in a brilliant if exasperating *tour de force* (1967), provided the theoretical rationale for the importance of countertransference, not only in anthropology but also in the other social sciences as well. It is worth noting that in a preface to this book La Barre commented that with its publication "the un-self-examined anthropologist henceforth has no right or business anthropologizing" (La Barre 1967:ix). As in the case of the recent views of psychoanalysis mentioned above, Devereux not only addressed the distorting effects of countertransference but also emphasized its use "as an important and even indispensable source of relevant supplementary social science data" (Devereux 1967:30). As he saw it, "it is *not* countertransference *per se*, but the *ignoring* and *mismanagement* of countertransference [that] is the real source of sterile error" (Devereux 1967: 202, italics in original).

Although aside from psychological anthropology, anthropologists have typically not attended to the countertransference dimension of the anthropologist's subjectivity, nevertheless virtually all of them have persistently emphasized others of its dimensions, which are usually subsumed under the concept of ethnocentrism. Beginning with Boas, novice field workers have been warned of the distorting influence of their cultural biases; and anthropological training has attempted to minimize such biases by requiring that graduate students acquire ethnographic competence in a wide range of non-Western societies and cultures.

Despite such training, cultural bias, so postmodernists claim, is an inescapable characteristic of all Western ethnographers, as are the other biases (such as racial, gender, social class) that comprise part of their subjectivity; and these biases, together with those engendered by colonialism and imperialism, produce serious distortions in the collection and reporting of ethnographic data.

While these claims, though often exaggerated, cannot be disregarded, postmodernists tend to disregard other biases inherent in the Western ethnographer's subjectivity which are the reverse of those which they emphasize. I have in mind, for example, the liberal political ideology of most Western anthropologists, their lingering noble savagism, and their alienation from, if not hostility to, Western culture (Lévi-Strauss 1964:381, 388), which argua-

bly account for the idealization of non-Western cultures that characterizes more than a few ethnographies. Having now examined my contention that many of the postmodernist claims concerning subjectivity, though true, are not new—as is also the case, according to Eysteinnsson (1990), with postmodernist thought more generally—we may now turn to my contention that in some critical respects its innovative claims are invalid.

#### POSTMODERNIST INNOVATIONS REGARDING SUBJECTIVITY

Before assessing the postmodernist innovations, I wish to register two caveats—the first related to my representation of the postmodernist position and the second to the representation of my own. First, since postmodernist anthropologists are as diverse a group as any other, the following generalized and schematic summary of their views applies to most, but not all, of them. That being so, some of my postmodernist friends will no doubt feel that I have misrepresented their views; and although I regret that, I trust they will appreciate that an essay of limited space must confine itself to central tendencies. Second, since any theoretical position, as postmodernists rightly stress, stems from a particular point of view, it is important to note that my assessment of their innovations is offered from the point of view of what John Searle calls the “Western Rationalist Tradition” and its epistemological and metaphysical postulates. Because the postmodernist project takes the repudiation of this tradition as one of its central aims, it is perhaps useful to briefly summarize these postulates which, following Searle (1993b: 60–68), I shall explicate in a set of six, interrelated, propositions:

First, reality exists independently of human representations; and any true statement about the world refers to “actual situations” in the world which correspond to such a statement. In short, contrary to postmodernism, this postulate holds that there is a “mind-independent external reality” which (in the language of philosophy) is referred to as “metaphysical realism.”

Second, language serves not only to communicate meanings but also to refer to objects and situations in the world that exist independently of language. In short, this postulate holds that language, contrary to postmodernism, has referential, and not merely communicative, functions.

Third, statements are true or false depending on whether the objects and situations to which they refer correspond to a greater or lesser degree to these statements. This, of course, is the “correspondence theory” of truth, which, to the extent that postmodernists hold a theory of truth—many of them, of course, reject this concept as “essentialist”—stands in sharp contrast to their “coherence” or “narrative” theory, as it is variously called.

Fourth, knowledge is objective, which signifies, contrary to postmodernism, that the truth of any knowledge claim is independent of the motive, culture, ethnicity, race, social class, or gender of the person(s) who make such a claim. Rather, its truth depends on the empirical support adduced on its behalf.

Fifth, logic and rationality provide a set of procedures, methods, and standards (of proof, validity, or reasonableness) which, contrary to postmodernism, enables one to assess competing knowledge claims.

Sixth, there exist valid criteria (both objective and intersubjective) for judging the relative merit of statements, theories, explanations, interpretations, and other kinds of accounts. According to this postulate, it is not the case that Creationism, for example, is as true as Darwinism, that the geocentric view is as correct as the heliocentric, that shamanistic explanations of dissociative states are as veridical as those of clinical psychiatry.

Postmodernists repudiate these six postulates of the Western Rationalist Tradition because of what they take to be two epistemological entailments of their conception of subjectivity. First, the subjectivity of the human object entails that the human sciences cannot—indeed ought not—be a science. Second, the subjectivity of the human subject entails that it is impossible to discover (what might be termed) objective or intersubjective truth. Beginning with the first, I now wish to assess these claims insofar as they relate to anthropology. (The following assessment is taken in part from Spiro [1994: ch. 1]).

### *The Rejection of Anthropology as Science*

Anthropology cannot (and should not) aspire to scientific status, postmodernists argue (for example, Rabinow and Sullivan 1987; Rosaldo 1989; Tyler 1987) because science is in the business of discovering causes; whereas if the subjectivity of the human object is taken seriously, then anthropology can only be in the business of discovering meanings. Although the term meaning is the black box of the anthropological lexicon, still since postmodernists believe (as I do) that culture and mind can be understood only by reference to intentions, purposes, desires, and the like, I take it that they are indicating these subjective entities when they refer to meaning. If that is so, then their opposing of meaning to cause only makes sense, however, in the hermeneutic view that the scientific concept of cause refers to material conditions alone (Habermas 1971, Ricoeur 1981, Vendler 1984). Thus, on that view a causal account of culture refers to ecological niches, modes of production, subsistence techniques, and so forth, just as a causal account of mind refers to the firing of neurons, the secretion of hormones, the action of neurotransmitters, and so on.

I would submit, however, that this materialist conception of cause represents an older view that is hardly credible today. To be sure, psychological behaviorists persist in denying that non-material things like intentions, purposes, and desires serve as causes of action, just as cultural materialists deny that these mental events have causal relevance for the creation and persistence of culture; but these views, which reflect what the philosopher Adolf Grünbaum [1984:3] has characterized as the “ontologically reductive notion of

scientific status," are dead as a dodo bird. As construed by even the most tough-minded philosophers of science, intentions, purposes, and desires, for all their being subjective, are no less causal than hormonal secretions and subsistence techniques (Grünbaum 1984:69–94; Hempel 1965:225–58).

Indeed, it is precisely because they hold that such subjective events are causal that most psychological anthropologists, beginning with the Culture and Personality movement, have insisted that they are critically important for the understanding of mind and culture. Since postmodernists, however, do *not* believe that intentions, desires, and so forth, have causal (explanatory) relevance, then why do they insist that such subjective events are critical for anthropological inquiry? 'Tis a paradox. That paradox aside, if causal explanation is central to the scientific enterprise and if these subjective events do have causal relevance, then, contrary to postmodernism, there are no valid grounds (in this regard at any rate) for denying that anthropology is, or at least in principle might be, a science.

If now the scientific method consists both of the formulation of explanatory theories in respect to some subject-matter and the employment of empirical and logical procedures by which, at least in principle, they can be verified or falsified, then the remaining question regarding the scientific status of anthropology is whether its modes of inquiry conform to this paradigm. Writing more than half a century ago, John Dewey put it this way.

The question is not whether the subject-matter of human relations [including anthropology] is or can ever become a science in the sense in which physics is now a science, but whether it is such as to permit . . . the development of methods which, as far as they go, satisfy the logical conditions that have to be satisfied in other branches of inquiry (Dewey 1938:487).

Notice that Dewey refers to methods, not techniques, for whereas *techniques* refer to the empirical procedures employed for obtaining or eliciting data, *methods* refer to the logical conditions that must be satisfied if the data are to be judged evidentially relevant for the acceptance or rejection of an explanation or interpretation. Now with the exception of a few remaining scientific (not scientific) diehards among us, I dare say that virtually every one else (postmodernist and modernist alike) agrees that the study of the human world requires very different techniques from those employed for the study of the physical world. Thus, while subjective techniques, such as insight, *Verstehen*, and empathy are critical in the study of mind and culture, that is not the case, for example, in the study of atoms, molecules, and galaxies.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This, however, is not always the case. Although empathy, for example, is usually regarded as a technique unique to the human sciences, still it is not entirely absent from the physical sciences. Thus, in his biography of the brilliant physicist and nobel laureate, Richard Feynman, Gleick (1992:142) writes that Feynman's colleagues suspected that if he wanted to know what an electron would do under given circumstances, he merely asked himself, "If I were an electron, what would I do?"

This consensus, however, does not obtain in respect to methods. Thus, postmodernists (and others who follow in the hermeneutic tradition) maintain that, whereas the physical sciences employ objective methods, such methods are not appropriate in the human sciences. In short, the subjectivity of the human object requires that subjective procedures of empathy, insight, *Verstehen*) be used not only as techniques but also as methods of inquiry. But if “method,” as I have already observed, refers to the logical conditions that must be satisfied if data are to be judged evidentially relevant for the acceptance or rejection of an explanation or interpretation, then this view is hard to credit. As the philosopher Richard Rudner (echoing Dewey) put it:

To hold that the social sciences are methodologically distinct from the other sciences is to hold not merely (or perhaps not at all) the banal view that the social sciences employ different techniques of inquiry, but rather the startling view that the social sciences require a different *logic* of inquiry (Rudner 1966:5, added emphasis).

Such a view is “startling,” I would suggest, because if empathy, *Verstehen*, and so forth, are employed not only as techniques for generating data, explanations, and interpretations (the context of discovery) but also as methods for assessing their truth value (the context of justification), then this subjective methodology suffers from critical logical and empirical problems (Rudner 1966:5–6). Logically, it is of course hopelessly circular, the “hermeneutic circle,” as hermeneutists themselves recognize. Empirically, especially in those all-too frequent instances in which the interpretations of different investigators disagree, it is useless: It provides no objective or intersubjective criteria by which conflicting interpretations can be adjudicated. As the psychologist Morris Eagle puts it, “If my interpretation or deciphered meaning or empathic grasp is radically different from and even contradicts yours, on whose empathy of interpretation does one rely for knowledge?” (Eagle:1984:164).

Although it might now seem evident that, in the context of justification, intellectually responsible inquiry requires objective (that is, scientific) methods not only in the physical but also in the human sciences, postmodernists reject this argument on two grounds, empirical and logical. As for the former, virtually all postmodernists dismiss the empirical procedures of the scientific method (when used in the human sciences) as positivistic, a highly pejorative term in their lexicon. In addition, many (but not all) of them also reject (Western) logic as a “logocentric” and “linear” discourse invented by “hegemonic” Western males and used by them to dominate non-Westerners and females; hence, to “privilege” such a “phallogocentric” discourse only serves to perpetuate their “patriarchal” interests.<sup>4</sup> (I confess that I would look more

<sup>4</sup> Two articles, both in the *Newsletter on Feminism* published by the American Philosophical Association, are typical of the genre. In one, the author writes that *modus ponens* was invented by males as a means for determining who counts as a rational being and that, since many women do not recognize this logical law as a valid form of inference, this is an example of how logic subserves the patriarchal oppression of women (Ginzberg 1989). In another article, the author

kindly upon the postmodernist project if its proponents could resist such dreary and endlessly repeated clichés.)<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that both arguments are reasoned, not capricious. For consistent with the postmodernist view that the concept of objective truth is “essentialist” (another pejorative term in their lexicon), their primary intellectual worries relate not to ethnographic research but ethnographic writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986); and in the latter regard the critical issue, as they see it, is not so much the truth of ethnographic findings, as the “authority” of ethnographic texts. Thus, for Clifford, the problem (mentioned above) is primarily a problem of textual authority (1983:142), of which he distinguishes four “modes” (experiential, interpretive, dialogical, and polyphonic); and how one chooses among them depends on one’s taste. It is only in a footnote that Clifford mentions “modes of authority based on natural-scientific epistemologies,” and then only to say that he does not intend to discuss them (1983: n. 1).

In my view this cavalier dismissal of “natural-scientific epistemologies” would, if taken seriously, have disastrous consequences, not only, however, for scholarship but also for civil society itself. Commenting on a similar attitude prevalent in his time, Dewey observed that it

encourages obscurantism; it promotes acceptance of beliefs formed before methods of inquiry had reached their present state; and it tends to relegate scientific (that is, competent) methods of inquiry to a specialized technical field. Since scientific methods simply exhibit free intelligence operating in the best manner available at a given time, the cultural waste, confusion and distortion that results from the failure to use these methods, in all fields in connection with all problems, is incalculable (Dewey 1938:535).

### *The Rejection of Objective Truth*

Having examined the postmodernists’ contention that the subjectivity of the human object entails that anthropology cannot (and ought not) aspire to scientific status, I now wish to examine their contention that the subjectivity of the

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argues that since the Aristotelian syllogism separates the form from the material content of an argument, it contributes to women’s marginalization and subordination because traditionally males are associated with form, females with matter (Cope-Kasten 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Bert States’ insightful comments on the functions of the repetition of these clichés in post-modern literary criticism—he refers to them as the “poststructural code”—also apply to post-modern anthropology (which, of course, borrowed them, as it has so much else, from literary criticism). Hearing these clichés over and over again—“providing one is inside the code”—is not a problem, States (1994:113) writes because

the terms are aesthetically inert, their interest absolutely exhausted in their mission of demonstrating the code doing its work of recontextualizing other codes. Thus, the code has much in common with the Hari Krishna chant that achieves its remarkable mesmeric purity through a deliberate poverty of invention. . . . The formulaic use of the terminology apparently fosters confidence, uniformity, and brotherhood among code users. . . . The code’s value consists simply in being displayed by insiders for insiders. . . . Clarity is beside the point: what, after all, is there to be clear about, since all ‘ideas’ are only context-dependent logocentric re-inscriptions plundered from another discourse—in effect, re-tautologizations?

human subject precludes the discovery of objective knowledge. This contention takes two forms: a restricted form, which denies that there can be objective knowledge of the non-Western human object, and an unrestricted one, which denies that there can be objective knowledge of any object. I shall begin with the restricted form, but since I have already addressed it at length elsewhere (Spiro 1984, 1986, 1990, 1994: ch.1) and since Gellner has recently subjected it to an incisive analysis (1992: 22–71), I shall treat it only briefly. (For an illuminating discussion of the concept of objectivity as it relates to the social sciences, see Rudner [1966: ch. 4]).

*The restricted form.* The contention that anthropology cannot discover objective truths about the non-Western human object is a conclusion derived from two postmodernist premises. First, human intentions, purposes, and desires—that is, meanings—are wholly culturally constructed; and, seeing that cultures differ one from another, meanings are culturally relative. Second, since cultures not only are different but radically different, their meanings are incommensurate one with another. From this postmodernists argue that the meanings of Western anthropologists are thus incommensurate with those of the non-Western peoples they study and that for Western anthropology non-Western peoples are wholly Other, that is, their minds and cultures opaque to objective understanding, which precludes the possibility of a comparative study of cultural meaning systems.

Although these conclusions follow validly from their premises, in my view (Spiro 1986, 1994: ch.1) both the premises and the conclusions are false. Rather, however, than reiterate my reasons for rejecting the premises, here I only wish to observe that the conclusions are both paradoxical and self-defeating for the postmodernist project itself. If (as postmodernists contend) anthropological inquiry is concerned with the study of meanings and if (as they also contend) non-Western peoples are Other, then how can a Western anthropologist comprehend their meanings when, *ex hypothesi*, they cannot be known?<sup>6</sup> Moreover, if their Otherness precludes the possibility of a comparative study of cultural meaning systems, then the very foundational claims of postmodernism—that meanings are wholly culturally constructed and culturally relative and that cultures are radically different and incommensurable—can only remain unfounded speculations with no empirical warrant (see, in this regard, Wikan [1993]).

Although many non-postmodernist anthropologists also view the elucidation of meanings as one of their central tasks, since they do not view cultures as incommensurable, they retain the traditional conception of anthropology as a comparative discipline. For while they too are impressed by the extraordinary range of cultural diversity, they recognize (or at least many of them do) that there are important constraints (for example, biological, psychological,

<sup>6</sup> To their credit, some postmodernists, recognizing this paradox, have bitten the bullet and have turned their attention to the study of Western culture.

ecological) on that diversity; consequently, cross-cultural differences in meaning systems are not so radical as to preclude anthropologists from understanding non-Western peoples. In short, for them cultural diversity does not entail that the non-Western object is *Other*. This, at least, is the testimony of many seasoned field workers, including, for example, Bourguignon ("The differences between human groups are not so radical that we cannot recognize ourselves as we are, or as we might be, in others" [1979:79]), E. Bruner ("We understand other people and their expressions on the basis of our own experience and self-understanding" [1986:6]), Erikson ("You will not see in another what you have not learned to recognize in yourself" [1964:29]), and R. Paul (We should be wary of social science theories that do not come "close to corresponding to what one's own actual experience of being alive is like" [1990:433]).

*The unrestricted form.* This form of the contention that the subjectivity of the human subject precludes the discovery of objective knowledge applies, unlike the first, not to the non-Western human object uniquely but to all objects (non-human as well as human, Western as well as non-Western); and it is grounded not in the postmodernist conception of culture but in its metaphysics and epistemology. (For an important discussion, see Reyna [1994]. For an illuminating, mostly postmodernist, examination of the concept of objectivity itself, see the collection of essays in Megill [1994].)

In opposition to the metaphysical realism of the Western Rationalist Tradition, postmodernism is committed to metaphysical idealism. Although some metaphysical idealists reject the very notion of an objective reality, this is not the case for most postmodernist anthropologists; rather, they reject the notion that such a reality exists independently of human representations (for example, Rabinow 1986). To put it differently, they deny the existence of a mind-independent reality. Since here, however, I am concerned not with metaphysical idealism as such but with the epistemological implications that postmodernists derive from it, my evaluation of this philosophical position can be expressed by a single passage in Searle (1993a:38–39) which, in my opinion, is decisive.

When [metaphysical idealists] present us with an argument they claim to do so in a language that is publicly intelligible. But, I wish to argue, public intelligibility presupposes the existence of a publicly accessible world. . . . Whenever we use a language that purports to have public objects of reference, we commit ourselves to realism. The commitment is not a specific theory as to *how* the world is, but rather *that* there is a way that it is. Thus, it is self-refuting for someone to claim in a public language that metaphysical realism is false, because a public language presupposes a public world, and that presupposition is metaphysical realism.

Let us now turn, then, from metaphysical idealism, as such, to the epistemological implications that postmodernists draw from it, especially as they relate to science. Since the external world, they argue, is perceived and

understood by means of one or another cultural "discourse," all knowledge-claims (whether of the physical or the human world) are "culturally constructed," hence necessarily subjective; moreover, since every cultural discourse is arbitrary, all knowledge-claims are also necessarily relative. That being so, then as Nietzsche (to whom postmodernism is profoundly indebted) argued, "There are not facts, but only interpretations."<sup>7</sup>

If, now, there are only interpretations—hence, if knowledge-claims do not correspond to any facts, none at any rate that can be agreed upon—then objective knowledge, postmodernists argue, is impossible, and science is only a particular kind of "story telling."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, since scientific stories are derived from one or another discourse, the criteria for their assessment, like those for any other story, can only be subjective. Given this view, it requires but a short step to conclude that to "privilege" the knowledge claims of Western science is hopelessly ethnocentric. As Feyerabend (who both influenced and was influenced by postmodernist anthropologists) put it, "There exist no 'objective' reasons for preferring science and Western rationalism to other traditions" (quoted in Rorty 1995:34).

But if science is just another kind of story telling, then scientific theories rest not so much on objective knowledge and an objective logic as on the 'interests' (racial, ethnic, sexual, gender, economic) of the story tellers. Since, then, its truth claims are not so much empirically as ideologically grounded, science is a form of domination which, in the case of anthropology, is evident in the asymmetries of power that characterize ethnographic field work and writing (see Fabian 1983, 1991; Haraway 1989; Lutz 1990; Rosaldo 1986; Said 1989; and the critique by Spencer 1989).<sup>9</sup>

Since, however, hardly any one would deny that science is influenced by ideology and interests, what makes the postmodernists' view exceptional is that, for them, they are not one aspect of science but the whole of it: Ideology and interests do more than influence the conduct of science, they dominate it.<sup>10</sup> In short, if warfare, according to Clausewitz, is diplomacy by other

<sup>7</sup> Since such a stance, Gellner observes, "means in effect the abandonment of any serious attempt to give a reasonable precise, documented, and testable account of anything . . . [it is unclear] why, given that universities already employ people to explain why knowledge is impossible (in philosophy departments), anthropology should reduplicate this task, in somewhat amateurish fashion" (1992:29).

<sup>8</sup> In this regard, postmodernist thought has already had an impact on American politics. According to the "new faith" in Washington, "what sort of person a politician is and what he actually does," a *New York Times* reporter writes, "are not really important. What is important is the perceived image of what he is and what he does. Politics is not about objective reality, but virtual reality" (Kelley 1993:64).

<sup>9</sup> Although in this respect, as in most others, the influence of Foucault on postmodernist thought is prominent, it should be noted that "critical anthropology," which also emphasizes the asymmetries of power in ethnographic fieldwork and writing, arose independently of Foucault. For a balanced advocacy of critical anthropology, see Diamond (1980: Introduction) and Wolf (1980). For one not so balanced, see the collection of articles edited by Nencel and Pels (1991).

<sup>10</sup> Since postmodernist thought is cross-disciplinary, it is not surprising that this anthropologi-

means, then for postmodernists, science—to borrow an expression from Haraway (1986)—is politics by other means.

Thus, Bruno Latour, whose studies of the laboratory sciences are widely cited by postmodernists, holds that scientific laboratories are entirely shaped by political agendas and that “*nothing* of any cognitive quality” takes place in them (1983:161, my added emphasis). Again, for Bob Scholte the concern of the physical sciences with discovering lawful relations and order—his example is the concept of biological constants—is primarily ideologically motivated. “Law and order in ‘nature’,” he writes (1984:964), “become scientific means to rationalize law and order in society.” Or consider Catherine Lutz on the scientific study of emotion. Since Western students of emotion, she claims, view emotions as “irrational,” “chaotic,” “uncontrollable,” and “dangerous” and since moreover these are the very qualities by which they “define women,” it is then evident—never mind that both claims are false (Spiro 1993)—that “the academic literature on emotion can be considered a form of political discourse on gender relations. . . . That literature arises out of and reenters a field of power struggles for the definition of true womanhood” (Lutz 1990:78).

Consider, finally, Rosaldo’s critique of *The Nuer* which, rather than addressing Evans-Pritchard’s methods or the accuracy of his findings—what one would normally expect of a critique of an ethnographic monograph—addresses only Evans-Pritchard’s allegedly “close links to contexts of domination” and his putative attempt “to deny the connections between power and knowledge . . . and to bracket the purity of [the] data. . . from the contaminating contexts through which they are extracted” (1986:88). In that attempt, Rosaldo continues, Evans-Pritchard implicitly “asks his readers to set aside the context of colonial domination and view his study as [an] . . . objective scientific account” (1986:93). Just in case, however, we mistake Evans-Pritchard’s “persona . . . of the detached ironic observer” from the real thing, Rosaldo asks us to consider two rhetorical questions: “Why did the government of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan request his report?” and “How much did it pay for the research and the publication of its results?” (1986:88).

If now science is ideologically motivated storytelling whose function is domination, then what makes one scientific story better than another is not, so postmodernists contend, that one is true and the other false but that one is good and the other bad, the latter qualities being taken here not as cognitive but as moral and political predicates. Hence, given their moral and political commitments, a scientific story is “good” insofar as it “empowers” subjugated

cal argument finds an exact parallel in history. As summarized by Appleby and her associates, postmodernist historians argue that the temporal orientation of history is “merely the willful imposition on subordinate peoples of a Western, imperialistic historical consciousness; it provides no access to true explanation, knowledge, or understanding” (Appleby *et al.* 1994:205). Moreover, historical ‘facts’ “do damage. They reinforce the hegemony of white Western men over women, other races, and other peoples” (1994: 205).

groups (ethnic and racial minorities, women, third-world peoples) and “bad” insofar as it perpetuates their subjugation (see Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Lutz 1990; Schepher-Hughes 1992, 1994. For an important analysis of this “moral model” of science, as he calls it, see D’Andrade [1995]).

It is now perhaps evident that this conception of science is far removed from—indeed it is an explicit critique of—the Western Rationalist Tradition, according to which science is the disinterested pursuit of reliable knowledge, or (more grandiosely) Truth. That this Enlightenment conception, however, has been honored more often in the breach than in the practice is, of course, a truism. Anyone acquainted with the conduct of science, whether as participant or observer, knows that scientists are motivated not only by the Holy Grail of knowledge—nor only, I would add, by the political and power motives stressed by postmodernists—but also by ambition and envy, fame and power, wealth and prestige, and an assortment of other, all too human motives.<sup>11</sup> It is also well-known that the influence of such non-cognitive motives on the conduct of science (but also on every other type of knowledge production) can be disastrous, ranging from unwitting distortions and misinterpretations to the willful cooking of data and the falsifying of reports.

It is precisely, however, because of these non-cognitive motives that science (and, I would add, any disciplined search for knowledge) needs an objective method as a means for counteracting their influence. Moreover, it is because scientific norms, uniquely, require such a method that science, postmodernist claims to the contrary notwithstanding, has been capable of discovering objective knowledge. (Indeed, in view of its extraordinary intellectual achievements, I would suggest that the cavalier dismissal of science by postmodernists is stunning.)

Lest, however, I be misunderstood, let me stress that non-cognitive motives are never, in my view, absent from scientific (or any other type of) inquiry, and no method, however objective, can eliminate them. Nor, I might add, is the influence of these motives necessarily negative. Thus, in the context of discovery, as I emphasized in a previous section, they may generate important ideas, interpretations, and findings. In order, however, for the truth-value of these (and all other) ideas, interpretations, and findings to be established, they

<sup>11</sup> In this connection, the following excerpts taken from James Clerk Maxwell’s Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Experimental Physics in the University of Cambridge, in 1871, seem quaint beyond belief:

[Scientists] are not studying or attempting to study the working of those blind forces which, we are told, are operating on crowds of obscure people. . . . [T]heir actions and thought [are] more free from the influence of passion. . . . [W]hen the action of the mind passes out of the intellectual stage, in which truth and error are the alternatives, into the more violent states of anger and passion, malice and envy, fury and madness; the student of science, though he is obliged to recognize the powerful influence which these wild forces have exercised on [the rest of] mankind, is perhaps in some measure disqualified from pursuing the study of this part of human nature (Quoted in Gillispie 1960: Foreword).

must be tested; and it is in this phase of scientific (or any other) inquiry that it is critical that the influence of non-cognitive motives be counteracted.

In short, it is here, in the context of justification, that the objective procedures of the scientific method—procedures which assess the truth of an idea or the validity of an interpretation by testing its predictive or retrodictive consequences—are indispensable if objective knowledge is to be discovered. Not only indispensable, but also efficacious. For if, in order to gain acceptance by the scientific community, the ideas, interpretations, and findings of the individual scientist must first pass through the crucible of the scientific method, then sooner or later—more often later than sooner—the distortions and misinterpretations engendered by the biases and interests of the individual scientist are discovered (and usually rectified), if not by the individual scientist him or herself, then by the community of scientists. In sum, if science has discovered objective knowledge, it is not because scientists, unlike the rest of mankind, are capable of transcending their subjectivity but because the latter's baneful effects on the conduct of science are, more often than not, neutralized by the norms of science as a social institution.

I would now contend that, in the context of justification, the need for objective procedures is arguably more important in the human than in the physical sciences. For if subjective interests are formidable obstacles to objectivity, for example in physics, then surely they are even more so, for example in anthropology, in which the potentiality for ideologically motivated distortion—imperialist and anti-imperialist, racist and anti-racist, ethnocentric and multicultural, sexist and feminist—is much the greater. Thus, if ethnography, as postmodernists (and others) insist, is an interpretive enterprise and if the ethnographer's interpretations are processed (as they surely are) through all those and other ideological filters, then without objective assessment procedures, how much credence can be placed in any interpretation, no matter how empathic or insightful the ethnographer?

Hence, just as it is a genetic fallacy for scientific materialists to contend that because interpretations are subjective, ethnographers must employ objective techniques even in the context of discovery, so also it is a logical fallacy for interpretive postmodernists to insist that they can only employ a subjective method even in the context of justification. It is not only fallacious but irresponsible. For if, on principle, ethnographers will not employ an objective method for assessing the validity of their interpretations—and, consequently, conflicting interpretations are merely different stories to be accepted or rejected because one is morally or politically better than another—then anything goes, in which case the ethnographic enterprise is not only empirically dubious but intellectually irresponsible.

Although I have done so before (Spiro 1986), it is perhaps useful to emphasize once again that, although the scientific method is applicable no less in the human than in the physical sciences, this does not entail that the empirical

procedures they employ in compliance with that method must be the same. For while methods, as I indicated earlier, refer to the logical conditions that must be satisfied for assessing the validity of an interpretation (or explanation), nonetheless the empirical procedures employed in physics, for example, for achieving such a valid assessment may be inappropriate in anthropology.

Hence, while I have no principled objection to laboratory experimentation, quantification, mathematical modeling, and so forth, for assessing the validity of ethnographic interpretations—on the contrary, I believe Chairman Mao's dictum that 100 flowers should bloom—nevertheless, I believe that in practice these procedures are only rarely appropriate (or efficacious) for that purpose. But though holding that in regard to its assessment procedures, the scientific method is pluralistic (not only across disciplines, but also within them), I do not believe, however, that this is the case in regard to that method itself. If the aim of responsible inquiry is objective knowledge, then regardless of discipline, the most reliable method (so far at least) for achieving that aim is the scientific method.

#### CONCLUSION

I wish to conclude not with my own words, but with those of a heterogeneous group of prominent scholars who, while sharing (as I do) some of the moral and political commitments of postmodernists, reject both their politicized conception of science and the metaphysical idealism from which it derives much of its intellectual underpinnings.

Consider, first, the words of a distinguished Marxist historian. "I used to think," Eric Hobsbawm (1993:63) writes,

that the profession of history, unlike that of, say, nuclear physics, could at least do no harm. Now I know it can. . . . [That being so] we have a responsibility to historical facts in general, and for criticizing the politico-ideological abuse of history in particular . . . [One reason] is the rise of "postmodernist" intellectual fashions . . . particularly in departments of literature and anthropology, which imply that all "facts" claiming objective existence are simply intellectual constructions. In short, that there is no clear difference between fact and fiction. But there is, and for historians, even for the most militantly antipositivist ones among us, the ability to distinguish between the two is absolutely fundamental. We cannot invent our facts. . . . Either the present Turkish government, which denies the attempted genocide of the Armenians in 1915, is right or it is not.

Consider, again, the words of another prominent historian. Defending John Hope Franklin (the distinguished historian of the American black experience) against his postmodernist critics, George Fredrickson (1993:32) writes that these critics

[question] the existence of a reality or set of objective facts external to the historian's "discourse" [because for them] history is increasingly viewed as a form of fiction . . . [But] if we cannot prove that the Holocaust revisionists are wrong in some inarguable way, we are clearly in deep trouble.

Consider now the words of a young anthropologist, moved to reflect on the consequences of postmodernist thought for understanding the horrors of state terror at the *Fin de Siècle*. "The notion that ethnographic representations," Suarez-Orozco (1994: 37–38) writes,

are to be treated as arbitrary "texts" or "fictions" simply privileging certain capricious positions has a certain rhetorical appeal, particularly when treating quaint folkloristic phenomena like the cockfight or folk poetry. . . . When turning to death camps, rape camps, and torture camps, the idea of treating events—and their representations—as "fictions" becomes instantly repulsive. . . . As cultural anthropology continues its affair with "subjectivity" . . . and righteously renounces any "scientific" pretensions, it is becoming a storyteller's craft . . . [But] how can such an anthropology be of use to our understanding—and dismantling—of ethnic cleansings, rape camps, and torture camps?

Consider, finally, the words of a distinguished and anti-fascist political philosopher of the past generation. Defending metaphysical realism against the politically inspired criticisms of metaphysical idealists, Hannah Arendt (1968:237) argued that metaphysical realism is a necessary condition for politics because the political enterprise is kept alive as a human possibility by the need to confront "unwelcome factual truths." Hence, while stressing that human subjectivity raises formidable problems for the conduct of social inquiry, still "they must not serve as justifications for blurring the dividing lines between fact, opinion, and interpretation, or as an excuse for the [scholar] to manipulate the facts as he pleases."

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