Rhetoric and the Authority of Ethnography

"Postmodernism" and the Social Reproduction of Texts

by P. Steven Sangren

Recent critics of anthropological theorizing and ethnographic authority have claimed "reflexivity," "polyphony," and "dialogue" as core values for anthropology's self-deconstruction. This paper examines this claim and these values with a particular emphasis on their (perhaps unintended) institutional consequences. It argues that the boundaries of reflexivity constructed in "postmodernist" discourse (focusing mainly on authority in texts) have been framed in ultimately misleading and surprisingly unreflective ways that diminish both the legitimacy and the logic of postmodernist claims. Thus, this paper is intended in part to defend the traditional bases of ethnography's authority, but more significantly it intends to suggest how anthropology can be reflexive in ways unelaborated by postmodernist critics. It also attempts to show how a particular "totalizing" theoretical stance (one that locates the logic and reproduction of power and authority in society as a whole—including academic institutions—rather than in texts alone) can dispel some of the "paradoxes" left unaddressed by postmodernist critics. An ironic effect of postmodernists' eschewing anthropology's self-definition as a science is an indirect institutional legitimation of the kinds of scientisms that postmodernists find most reprehensible (e.g., biological and economic reductionism). Moreover, postmodernist "privileging" of experience unintentionally reproduces the epistemology of Western individualism in the name of its radical deconstruction.


Few anthropologists or other professionals engaged in what current jargon terms "cultural studies" have failed to notice the recent proliferation of books and articles that analyze the rhetoric of ethnographic writing. This proliferation of a sort of "meta-anthropology" is clearly part of the larger "deconstructive" or "postmodernist" fashion in literary criticism inspired by continental [mainly French] philosophy. One consequence of this trend is that cultural anthropology must add to its polemics against economism and scientism a defense against attacks from, epistemologically, the other side. Anthropology now finds itself identified with labels that it is accustomed to attaching to economics, political science, and sociology: unconsciously positivistic, naive, and unreflective of its own historical and cultural contingency.

Some of the more widely publicized of these attacks come from outside the discipline (e.g., Said 1978), but I shall focus on critiques originating within it, especially two books—Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences, by George E. Marcus and M. J. Fischer, and Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, edited by James E. Clifford and George E. Marcus. These books were published in close succession in 1986, and their authors, editors, and many of the contributors to Writing Culture have been at the forefront of the internal critique of rhetoric and authority in ethnographic writing.

Like many of my colleagues, I am simultaneously intrigued and appalled by the combination of insight and hubris that characterizes this making of anthropology itself as an object or "other" for study. This endeavor raises intriguing issues, among them one of the most important is the notion that the "reflexive" turning of the

1. Fischer [1986] equates postmodernism with skepticism regarding the grounds of authority. One wonders whether self-styled postmodernists believe they are unencumbered by the constraints of a general problem. What becomes fashionable, who asserts the authority to define the fashionable, and the operations of fashion in intellectual institutions are all important aspects of the social reproduction of knowledge about which the authors discussed here are surprisingly unreflective.

2. Many of the themes addressed in the two books are anticipated in Marcus [1980a], Clifford [1985], and Marcus and Cushman [1982]. The positions I dispute are most fully articulated in these articles and in Marcus and Fischer [1986], Marcus [1986a, b], Fischer [1986], Clifford [1986a, b], and, to a lesser extent, Crapanzano [1986], Tyler [1986], and Pratt [1986]. Rosaldo's [1986] critique of Le Roy Ladurie and Evans-Pritchard seems to me to be at some variance with the more general claims of his fellow contributors, as I shall point out below. Both Asad [1986] and Rabinow [1986] raise issues that suggest some of the shortcomings or at least limitations of postmodern or experimental ethnography. In what follows, by postmodernist or experimentalist I mean mainly the positions most explicitly articulated by Clifford, Marcus, Marcus and Fischer, Marcus and Cushman, and Tyler. Fellow participants in this discourse obviously do not entirely share their enthusiasm for the "new modernist," and I do not wish to imply that a monolithic body of opinion exists on the contentious issues of anthropological authority and rhetoric. However, for the purposes of this essay's argument, it would be too cumbersome to refer to all of the arguments, subtle and marked, that distinguish writers associated, closely and broadly, with discourse on ethnographic rhetoric and authority.
anthropological gaze toward anthropology itself subverts the discipline’s objectifying authority. However, in my view the terms in which this reflexivity has been framed are ultimately misleading and surprisingly “unreflexive” in ways that diminish both the legitimacy and the logic of the arguments it produces. Thus, this paper is intended in part to defend the traditional authority of ethnography [although without denying importance to problematics raised in this regard], but more significantly it intends to suggest how anthropology can be truly reflexive in ways unelaborated by self-proclaimed “reflexive” anthropologists and to defend ethnography’s authority by invoking this somewhat differently conceived reflexivity. It also attempts to show how a particular, “totalizing” theoretical stance can dispel some of the “paradoxes” left unaddressed by recent criticism.

I focus here on criticism from within the discipline not only because I am an anthropologist but also because in my view this internal dialog has more intellectual merit, and thus “authority,” than those originating outside the field. A brief discussion of Said’s [1978] widely discussed critique of “Orientalism” may serve as an example in this regard. I believe that a coherent argument can be made that the object constituted in Said’s concept of “Orientalism” is a fabrication of precisely the sort that he claims to discover in the Western constructions of “Oriental” cultures. Moreover, one of the properties of Said’s fabrication is that it appropriates important relativizing insights from the very disciplines it subverts. In other words, arguments like Said’s, although not without merit and insight regarding the social and historical conditions necessary to produce anthropology and similar disciplines, in the end underestimate the important counterhegemonic possibilities in these disciplines in order to mask their own appropriation of the legitimating power of precisely these possibilities.

To accomplish this, Said must construct an impoverished and ideologically mystifying [I reveal my “positivism” here] image and history of “Orientalism.” In short, he reproduces a rhetoric of domination and legitimacy in making of “Orientalism” an object that is logically analogous to that he points out in the ways “Orientalism” makes other cultures its object and thus becomes an instrument in their “domination.” This appropriation of legitimacy allows him to write with the authority that was once the Orientalist’s. Said attempts to defend this appropriation of what Michel Foucault3 terms “knowledge/power” by granting authority to various problematically fabricated literary voices from the “Third World” [including his own?] and by seeing in them the “really” legitimate voices of the “other.”

What he refuses to take fully into account—to do so would undermine the legitimacy of his endeavor—is that when such voices are identified as those that embody stratagems like his, they are essentially like the hegemonic rhetoric of legitimacy, power, and authority that they claim to subvert; they thus reproduce the forms of the very discourses they attempt to delegitimate. In order words, such voices do not constitute the alternatives Said sees in them because they in effect reproduce the structure of the rhetoric [if not the institutions] of domination he describes in Western culture,4 albeit by shifting legitimacy into the hands of different [can they still be called “Third World”?] elites.

Said’s positive insights notwithstanding, there are two important respects in which his analysis of Orientalism underestimates the counterhegemonic contributions of Western study of exotic cultures. First, Western anthro-
and its vaguely defined calls to replace epistemological “totalizing” with “polyphony” and “partiality,” the discipline had best rethink and perhaps defend its authority.

Let me be clear regarding my intentions here. It seems to me that attention to the locus of authority in ethnographic writing and cultural studies in general has had and continues to have a salutary effect. The disavowal of epistemology advocated by Rorty [1979] and promulgated by many of the arguments offered in these two books (e.g., Rabinow 1986) notwithstanding, the issues are essentially epistemological ones—what are the philosophical bases for anthropological knowing? Of course, knowing is not unrelated to power and authority. Moreover, the ways in which knowledge, power, and authority are socially and culturally reproduced are characteristically masked, opaque, and unconscious to actors. To some degree, all cultural systems—including anthropology—are based on the delusion that, to use Geertz’s [1973] felicitous phrase, they are “uniquely realistic.”

“To some degree,” but to what degree? This seems to me to be the crucial question that the many contributors to these discussions fail to confront. Clifford asserts [1986:24] that “the authors in this volume do not suggest that one cultural account is as good as any other,” but he does not construct an explicit argument specifying the criteria for a “good account.” Presumably good accounts are more polyphonic and dialogic, but as Clifford himself6 points out, polyphony and dialog are logically, to coin a term, untexturable.7 Tyler’s [1986] contention that even though texts cannot be truly dialogic or polyphonic, they can “evolve” dialog and polyphony expresses a desire, not a possibility. Can an anthropology be grounded on the valorizing of “polyphony” and the conscious eschewal of “totalizing” epistemologies? I think not, and I shall attempt to defend this position not only in straightforward “logocentric” terms but also by an analysis of the structure of the arguments, the rhetoric, and the implicit appeals to authority made by advocates of postmodern ethnography.

To anticipate, I believe that I can show that the rhetoric proclaiming the virtues of the “new, experimental moment in ethnographic writing” (even more than most of the ethnographic writing so labelled) reproduces in forms more opaque and “mystifying” than do many of the older forms it delegitimates the same strivings for hegemony, power, and authority that it attributes to the older forms. My own rhetoric here may seem overly contentious, but I believe the arguments I criticize sanction this contentiousness. By making the rhetoric of authority in ethnography the object of analysis, critics draw attention to their own uses of rhetoric. Attempts to inoculate their own texts against deconstruction inevitably ring hollow in such a context—e.g., Clifford’s [1986:24] assertion that “these texts do not prophesy” is a rhetorical attempt to confront precisely the fact that they do prophesy, and in the most extravagant terms. In other words, a critic of criticism is as free to employ rhetoric in the deconstruction of rhetoric as its deconstructors. The critics cannot authoritatively set the rules or bound the contexts of discourse. As they ought to be the first to acknowledge, such efforts are masked appropriations of power, and I, for one, shall contest their legitimacy.

My interest in taking up a defense of conventional ethnographic authority (but not necessarily conventional ethnography), albeit by somewhat unconventional means, is more than an exercise in personal or disciplinary self-vindication, however. I believe that this defense can serve as an example of how a particular variety of “epistemological totalizing” can be more “reflexively” enlightening than self-styled dialogic or “decentered” approaches. To this end, I shall argue that anthropological analysis of the authority of ethnography must specify the conditions of ethnography’s production and reproduction in society, especially academic institutions, not just in texts.

Although some of the writers discussed here manifest an awareness of this hiatus in their “reflexivity,” none follows through to examine its implications for the more ambitious of postmodernism’s claims. For example, expressing what seems to me a less disingenuous “reflexivity” than that displayed in some of the other essays, Rabinow notes that “it is still not clear whether the deconstructive-semiotic turn (an admittedly vague label) is a salutary loosening up, an opening for exciting new work of major import, or a tactic in the field of cultural politics to be understood primarily in sociological terms” [1986:242]. He goes on to argue that a sociology of anthropological knowing is needed. But not even Rabinow confronts the challenges any conceivable such
sociology would pose for the basic claims made by proponents of postmodern ethnography. I believe that a preliminary outlining of some of the elements that must enter such a sociology of the production and reproduction of ethnographies, criticism of ethnographies, and criticism of the critics will serve to point out some serious deficiencies in the postmodernist stance.

Millennial Rhetoric and the Locus of “Dialog”

There is a strikingly millennial tone in some of the rhetoric of recent meta-anthropology. Marcus and Fischer [1986] repeatedly announce the current crisis and imminent collapse of “grand theory” in anthropology.8 Clifford informs us that the authority of traditional ethnographic writing has crumbled [1986a:2], that a new “complex interdisciplinary area” is emerging from the “crisis in anthropology” [p. 3], and that “the essays in this volume occupy a new space opened up by the disintegration of ‘Man’ as telos for a whole discipline” [p. 4]. [And a new space for young academics seeking to occupy the higher positions in the hierarchy of academia?] According to Marcus [1986:263], “the larger theoretical project of twentieth-century social and cultural anthropology is in disarray.”9 In short, a new day is dawning not only in ethnographic writing but in cultural studies in general.

It is, of course, a classic characteristic of millennial movements that the present order be stripped of legitimacy, often by defining it as rife with corruption and decay. The old order is exposed as unviable, immoral, extinct, out with the old, in with the new! It is also a characteristic of millenial ideologies that a legitimating “history” be constructed to explain why the old order no longer makes sense and how things have come to such straits. In this regard, Marcus and Fischer’s reconstructions of the history of anthropology in the 1960s are millennial myths. The efforts of anthropologists prior to the 1960s were, in their view, “thoroughly de-legitimated” when it became increasingly apparent [because of the Vietnam War] that, “in purely analytic terms [?], reducing the richness of social life, especially conflict, to the notions of function and system equilibrium on which the Parsonian vision depended, proved unsatisfactory” [1986:11].

A surprisingly conventional and unidirectional view of social theory’s “causes” in recent social history erupts sporadically throughout Anthropology as Cultural Critique [e.g., pp. 41, 79, 118, 122; see also Marcus 1986a]. Clifford [1983:118] also asserts that “the present predicament is linked to the breakup and redistribution of colonial power in the decades after 1950.” The following quotation from Marcus [1986a:167 n. 3] is illustrative of both this strategically mythologized “history” and its unselfconscious assertion of a “privileged” [to borrow from the rhetoric in question] status for Marcus and experimental ethnographers:

This move toward the ethnographic in American academic political economy . . . is related to a widely perceived decline of the post-World War II international order in which America has held a hegemonic position and to an undermining of the American form of the welfare state itself. A sense of profound transition in the foundations of domestic and international reality, as seen from the American perspective, has in turn been reflected intellectually in a widespread retreat from theoretically centralized and organized fields of knowledge. Goals of organizing scholarly practice in such diverse fields as history, the social sciences, literature, art, and architecture have given way to fragmentation and a spirit of experimentation that aims to explore ways to evoke and represent diversity in social life. . . . Among the vehicles of experimentation, precocious in relation to this trend, is ethnography in anthropology.

The assertion of a “widespread retreat from theoretically centralized and organized fields of knowledge” is itself highly contestable [e.g., note Bourdieu’s widespread influence in anthropology, not to mention Habermas’s even broader audience], but even if granted, the notion that intellectual trends so mechanically “reflect” political economy betrays a rather unreflective theoretical “totalizing” at a macrosociological and -historical level that is inconsistent with the antipathy Marcus and other postmodernists manifest toward “totalizing” theories at the micro- [or “actor’s-point-of-view”] level [see below].10

In addition to a rather mechanistic and self-contradictory sociological determinism, several essayists invoke an image of progress in the recent history of ideas—placing those argued in the essays themselves in

8. At the same time, however, they frequently appeal to their own authority as arbiters of grand theory generally opaque to many of their readers [e.g., Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, et al.]. In this regard, Fischer’s [1986:239] assertion that among prominent intellectuals Lévi-Strauss and Derrida are the textual stylists most “pleasurable to read” and lacking in “pedantic laboredness” is not only amusing but also a rhetoric of power; it communicates the message that what most readers find difficult the writer finds pleasurable.

9. Rabinow [1986:243] tempers the millennial enthusiasm of some of his colleagues, noting that “the insight that anthropologists write employing literary conventions, although interesting, is not inherently crisis-provoking.” Indeed!

10. Marcus’s treatment of the question of “unintended consequences” of social action manifests his lack of understanding of the challenges attention to such consequences raises for his privileging of an actor’s-point-of-view perspective on culture. His solution to the problem of reconciling the dialectical truism that cultural subjects are both the products and, collectively, the creators of culture with his phenomenological and, one might even argue, individualist intuitions is pure expediency: “the Marxist system imagery remains the most convenient and comprehensive framework for embedding single-locale ethnography in political economy” [1986a:169]. Logical contradictions are sanctioned by eschewal of “totalizing” ambition. I return to these contradictions in subsequent discussion of culture as “text.”
the vanguard, of course (see, e.g., the turn of phrase in Marcus and Fischer’s assertion that Parsonian “totalizing” has been historically [and scientifically!] “disproved”). Apparently the authors see no contradiction between their positivistic, assertive, unargued, and highly mythologized assessments of the historical causes and intrinsic value of other social theories and the case they make for relativity, subtlety, dialog, and pluralism in ethnographic treatments of the “other.” I believe this myopia is grounded in the millennial structure of their rhetoric, a peculiarly reconstructed and deterministic view of the history of anthropology and social theory is necessary to legitimate the hegemonic position that they attempt to construct for themselves, even though the characteristics of that history are quite positivistic and contradict their characterizations of the nature of the anthropological enterprise that is to occupy the new, theoretically and ethically “higher” ground. This kind of self-contradictory, logically circular myopia is no doubt a common characteristic of ideology but especially striking in a discourse which claims to make “our taken-for-granted ways recognizable as sociocultural constructions for which we can exercise responsibility” (Fischer 1986:202).\(^{11}\)

Several advocates of the “new moment” in ethnography manifest an undisguised self-consciousness as belonging to an enlightened vanguard, a group of insiders against the wider community of scholars who have inexplicably failed to get the “news” that “[a] return to earlier modes of unselfconscious representation is not a coherent position” (e.g., Rabinow 1986:230). This self-consciousness as possessors of a new truth is also characteristic of millennial thought. So, too, is the notion that by some kind of rite of passage, the discipline of anthropology must be born again.\(^{12}\) Just as the proselytizers of the new experimental ethnography have been transformed and have transcended the misguided views of their graduate training, so should the rest of the profession. Clifford [1986a:25] anticipates criticisms like the present essay: “In the wake of semiotics, post-structuralism, hermeneutics, and deconstruction there has been considerable talk about a return to plain speaking and to realism. But to return to realism one must first have left it!” He implies here, in some contradiction to the general thrust of his essay—e.g., that, “in cultural studies at least, we can no longer know the whole truth, or even claim to approach it”—we can nonetheless return to the high ground of “reality” if we have first passed through a liminal period of unstructuredness that allows us later to recapture a more relativized or contingent reality.

I shall return presently to the logic of this assertion. What I wish to draw attention to here is the understated millennial promise to “return” to the comforts of order by passing through the “space” of chaos. Only after having undergone such initiation does the anthropologist acquire the right to speak (or write). This statement amounts to a bold assertion of authority that the reader is encouraged to accept on faith. No argument or analysis of the way this renewed “realism” relates to the deconstructive thrust of the rest of the argument is provided. For example, again in response to anticipated critics, Clifford defends “literary, theoretical reflexivity” against the charge that it may constitute a “barrier to the task of writing ‘grounded’ or ‘unified’ cultural and historical studies” by asserting that “in practice . . . such questions do not necessarily inhibit those who entertain them from producing truthful, realistic accounts” (1986a:24–25).

There is sleight-of-hand involved here; those who have acquired the appropriate attitude (in practice by invoking the authenticating discourse of appropriate intellectual deities\(^{13}\)) are empowered to claim the authority of access to a realer reality by means of denying its existence. “Grounded” studies may be produced only by those who have learned that there is, ultimately, no ground. The structure of this kind of logic is once again strikingly similar to that of millennial and other revealed faiths.

Let me shift “registers” here and confront openly an aspect of my own rhetoric. By equating literary, theoretical reflexivity of the sort claimed in these texts with millennial ideology (which, no matter how dialogic, relativist, and reflexive its analyst’s rhetoric, never acquires ideological authority in Western academic writing), I clearly intend to call the logic (and, hence, legitimacy) of the former into question. In other words, I admit that there may be a kind of rhetorical trick involved in constructing a parallel between ideological justifications for the new, experimental ethnography and a world view so obviously lacking legitimacy in the minds of conceivable readers of this argument.

But is this trick, deconstructing the rhetoric of the deconstruction of the rhetoric of anthropology, really much different from the deconstruction of conventional ethnography attempted in the essays in question? Obviously, I think not, but in any case the comparison of meta-anthropology with millennial ideology is instructive for other reasons as well. Most important among these, in my view, is the relationship between authority and order that the comparison suggests. One need not construct a literal “voice” for the other in ethnography (in any event, as Marcus [1986a] notes, the claim to do so

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11. The assertion that somehow postmodernism assumes greater responsibility for its productions is not defended. Very much counter to the spirit of postmodernists like Foucault, who seems at times to eschew any form of responsibility—either social or scientific—for his productions, Habermas directly confronts the philosophical difficulties surrounding the task of making critical theory a liberating project in human terms.

12. Note the similarity between this logic and Victor Turner’s idea that a period of liminal suspension of structure (“antistructure”) is characteristic of rites of passage. I discuss the logical difficulties involved in Turner’s (e.g., 1974) notion of “antistructure” in an analysis of Chinese pilgrimages (Sangren 1987a; see also T. Turner 1977).

13. Note Clifford’s (1986a:3) invocation of academic luminaries to no apparent purpose other than to authorize and locate his text within their aura.
is highly contestable and can be seen as another form of authenticating rhetoric\textsuperscript{14} to engage in a dialogic relationship with another culture. With this point in mind, let me digress into a dialogic consideration of aspects of heterodox religious ideology in Chinese culture.

One of the most interesting characteristics of millennial ideology and sectarian groups in China (e.g., Overmyer 1976; Jordan and Overmyer 1986; Sangren 1983, 1987a; Naquin 1976) is the way they upset, delegitimate, call into question, or invert conventional Chinese cosmologies. I have written elsewhere on the relationships between what I term heterodox and orthodox structures of value in Chinese thought (Sangren 1987a). In brief, I argue that Chinese heterodoxies, although they frequently call dominant social and cultural categories of “reality” into question, only make sense to Chinese (including sectarians) as counterparts to orthodox, order-affirming ideologies.

I also argue that despite the fact that Chinese heterodoxies (including so-called philosophical Taoism, the White Lotus religion, and various forms of world-rejecting Buddhism) are philosophically interesting and have played an important historical role in China by incorporating an element of skepticism in self-consciously positivist Confucian institutions, they are socially less robust precisely because they cannot legitimate any conceivable cultural or social order. They make social (as opposed to textual or philosophical) sense only in opposition.

Of course, much the same point is frequently made with reference to the deconstructive movement in the West. Consequently, this comparison draws attention to the fact—the imaginative myths constructed by enthusiastic proponents notwithstanding (Tyler’s [1986] is especially notable)—that the discovery that conceptual ordering is a form of power and authority is not unique to the modern West, much less to postmoderns. In other words, let us dispense with the “authorizing” idea that the “new moment” of order-questioning is altogether new. By the same token, although the recent popularity of deconstructive rhetoric in academia may not be ascribable to “fashion alone” [Marcus 1986a:166–67], comparison with Chinese “similar differences” [contrasts between order-affirming and order-questioning epistemologies] suggests that we should not conclude, as Marcus seems to do, that deconstructive rhetoric belongs at the advanced end of some kind of progressive development of knowledge and understanding.

All the millennial elements found in the rhetoric of the “new, experimental moment in ethnography”—

decay, initiation, “decentered” chaos, and return—are also found in Chinese sectarianism. I believe that these themes are significant because in both cases they embody a veiled striving for power and transcendence. If I am correct in this regard, this striving or desire is especially ironic or, better, utopian (a fact that both Tyler [1986] and Clifford [1983] admit but fail to confront fully) in the case of the advocates of experimental ethnography\textsuperscript{15} because the rhetorical rejection of power and authority becomes the means by which power and authority are acquired and legitimated. Just as Rosaldo sees in the writings of Le Roy Ladurie a case of invoking the “will to truth in order to suppress the document’s will to power” (1986:79), it is possible to perceive in the “will to unmask the will to power” a displaced will to power very similar to that which it subverts.

Again, it is Rabinow who is most perceptive of this potentiality. Citing Pierre Bourdieu’s studies of French education, he notes that “Bourdieu is particularly attentive to strategies of cultural power that advance through denying their attachment to immediate political ends and thereby accumulate both symbolic capital and ‘high’ structural position” (1986:252). Rabinow does not link this observation directly to arguments like those advanced by Marcus, Fischer, and Clifford, but the linkage seems inescapable.

In Chinese thought, one of the classic forms of heterodox skepticism is denial of categorical distinction. Taoism, for example, was as aware of the inherently empowering activity of dividing reality into categories as are today’s deconstructionists concerned over the “violence” enacted upon textually created “others.” I shall not go into the possible psychodynamics (perhaps universal) embodied in what must be seen as a desire reciprocal to the “will to power” (call it utopianism, transcendence?),\textsuperscript{16} what concerns me here is the way even order-questioning epistemologies (whether they admit

\textsuperscript{15} My prose is awkward here in part because despite the impasioned arguments for postmodern or “polyphonic” ethnography, it is defined as an ideal that could never be implemented in a straightforward practice (Tyler 1986). This position amounts to a form of mysticism.

\textsuperscript{16} The nature of the connection between culturally and socially constituted authority and the psychodynamics of individual desire is one of the great unresolved problems of social theory. That there is such a connection is clear, but attempts to explicate it by, for example, existential psychiatry (e.g., Otto Rank, Ernest Becker, Richard Sennett) fall short of explaining cultural differences. Nonetheless, one must admit that the problems of authority, order, and meaning motivate individual scholars engaged in “cultural studies.” At some level, self-vindication is undoubtedly always involved (my own argument obviously notwithstanding). However, the nature of the psychogenesis of argument does not bear directly on its intrinsic value. My own guess is that the logic of the reproduction of social-cum-cultural systems dialectically encompasses the reproduction of cultural subjects or “personalities.” The relationship must be something like a sort of mutual constraint broadly analogous to the relationships between and among individual organisms, breeding populations, species, and ecosystems. It is the nature of this “dialectic” that must be thought through more clearly before studies of “culture and personality,” the “cultural construction of emotions,” or postmodernism’s claim to provide a kind of social psychotherapy (e.g., Fischer 1986) can begin to make much sense.
to being epistemologies or not) are inevitably turned toward legitimating other orders and authorities. Because the contrast between ancient Taoist thought and Confucian hierarchy [e.g., Mote 1971, Sangren 1987a, Girardot 1983] is so well known, I shall focus on two other examples: the worship of the Unborn Mother characteristic of the White Lotus religion and many related cults in late traditional China and still active in Taiwan [Sangren 1983, 1987a; Overmyer 1976; Jordan and Overmyer 1986; Naquin 1976] and a case described by Strickmann (1978) centering on the influence of the 12th-century Taoist adept Lin Ling-su on the Sung emperor Hui-tsung.

The term “Unborn Mother” or “Eternal Mother” [Wu Sheng Lao Mu] refers explicitly to the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth. The deity is asserted to exist outside or beyond the cycle of karmic retribution and cosmological hierarchy. For Chinese sectarians [for example, members of the I-kuan tao or “Unity” sect prominent in present-day Taiwan], the significance of this transcendence is syncretic. The group claims to have direct and exclusive access to the unifying “way” (t’ao) that is the historical source of all religious knowledge throughout the world, including specifically Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, as well as Christianity and Islam. All these other religions are subordinated to I-kuan tao by placing I-kuan tao at their historical origin.

The Unborn Mother is more than an obvious attempt to subordinate symbolically competing religious ideologies and institutions, however. It also manages both to capture the legitimating authority embodied in orthodox cultural orderings [e.g., the state, family, traditional pantheon, etc.] and to satisfy an evident desire to escape the unwanted consequences of such ordering authority [a will to “disorder” or “unpower”]. Historically, order-questioning movements in China have appealed to various categories of outsiders, often led by scholars whose ambitions in the imperial examination system were frustrated. Order, distinction, and hierarchy all apply power in the sense that power is, in effect, the activity of ordering. Another way to put this is that power consists in the mediation of [or, to invoke currently popular but mystifying jargon, power exists in the “space between”] order and disorder. Power, like authority and order, is something both desired and experienced as oppressive. The Unborn Mother is at once an escape from power, authority, and order and their source.

The Unborn Mother—unlike more unambiguously order-affirming Chinese symbols such as heaven (t’ien: a kind of abstract ordering principle in high Confucian philosophy), the emperor [heaven’s mediator, the t’ien-tzu], and the Jade Emperor [Yu Huang Ta Ti: the Emperor of Heaven]—is not at the top of hierarchical orderings but outside them. But a kind of ideological shiftiness allows this “outside” to be read “above” when context makes this desirable. Thus, one of the appeals of the symbol is that it gives worshippers a more direct, unmediated access to power [defined as the mediation of order and disorder] than do more orthodox orderings but at the same time allows them to affect a detached, uncommitted stance relative to more entrenched, orthodox orderings.

A similar uncommitted stance is occupied by postmodernist critics. Clifford [1983:137], for example, invokes Bakhtin:

For Bakhtin, preoccupied with the representation of non-homogeneous wholes, there are no integrated cultural worlds or languages. All attempts to posit such abstract unities are constructs of monological power. A “culture” is, concretely, an open-ended, creative dialogue of subcultures, of insiders and outsiders, of diverse factions; a “language” is the interplay and struggle of regional dialects, professional jargons, generic commonplaces, the speech of different age groups, individuals and so forth.

Even though Clifford recognizes that rhetorical attempts to textualize this “polyphony” are still “representations of dialogue” [p. 134], he maintains that ethnographic authority ought to depend on an “ability fictionally to maintain the strangeness of the other voice and to hold in view the specific contingencies of the exchange” [p. 135]. To justify this as a possibility, he again invokes Bakhtin, who, in Clifford’s view, “discovers a utopian textual space where discursive complexity, the dialogical interplay of voices, can be accommodated.” Like the Unborn Mother, this utopian space is claimed to subvert the notion of totalizing order even though its own textual construction is itself an ordering and empowering totalization.

I believe Bakhtin and many critics of anthropology interested in textual authority conflate authority in texts with authority in society. The former certainly plays a role in the production and reproduction of the latter, but if “textual” authority were as efficacious as some literary critics imply, writers would be kings. Viewing textual authority as central to authority in general clearly commends itself to literary critics in part because it places the deconstruction of such authority at the center of political and social action. In other words, by making textual authority stand for cultural authority in general, the literary critic, as fabricator and deconstructor of that authority, places him-/herself in a position of transcendental power—if not that of a king, at least that of a high priest. Although this appropriation of power may be socially effective in academic institutions—Writing

17. Study of the history of Chinese philosophy and of Chinese history in general is significantly complicated by the rhetorical penchant of chroniclers of ideas and events for seeking authority in the past. The authority of competitors was thus frequently contested by discovering an authority more ancien than the one they invoked. In this respect, Chinese sectarianism employs a rhetoric of authority pervasive in Chinese culture [Sangren n.d.b].

18. The femaleness of the Unborn Mother is important in this regard. The contrast male:female:order:disorder:yang:yiin is pervasive not only in cultural categories but in Chinese social institutions ranging from systems of marriage and family organization to the state [Sangren 1983, 1987a].
Culture may be taken as evidence of this phenomenon—such authority does not seriously threaten other ways of constituting and reproducing authority in society as a whole.

At the beginning of this essay I referred to Said’s association of the Orientalists’ authorial construction of a textually dominated “other” with colonial domination. Historically, such an association clearly exists, and one can even argue that colonial domination was a necessary condition for Orientalism. However, as I noted above, this observation obscures the fact that Orientalism is not only a product of or legitimator for colonial domination. Whatever “authority” is created in a text has its most direct social effect not in the world of political and economic domination of the Third World by colonial and neocolonial powers but in the academic institutions in which its author participates.

I shall consider the effect of this more immediate social context on the reproduction of ethnographic texts and authority in a later section, what I wish to draw attention to here is that whatever its other characteristics, this social context has been and continues to be “dialogic.” [The implications of Geertz’s [1973] and Boon’s [1983] arguments to this end are not fully recognized by Clifford, Marcus, Fischer, and Tyler in this regard.] One need not create a utopian space in a particular text for fictionalized polyphony or dialog; whatever real dialog exists exists in the social processes of competition and reproduction of such texts [i.e., in the ways criticism, careers, academic promotions, etc., combine to encourage or discourage deeper understandings of exotic societies and cultures] as much as in the fieldwork situation. Moreover, whatever “authority” is constructed inheres in this social process much more than in the construction of an authorial voice over a dominated “other” in a text. Writers like Clifford and Said make too much of this latter sort of authority, and this leads them not only to a lack of attention to the larger contexts [of which fieldwork is only one part] within which the various “authorities” constructed in individual texts are authoritatively judged but also to a lack of reflexivity regarding their own location in such a context.

Consider in this regard the case of Lin Ling-su as a contribution to a culturally “dialogic” critique of postmodernist criticism. Strickmann’s [1978] account of how the Taoist Lin acquired dominant influence with the Sung emperor by means of a creative restructurin of the Chinese cosmos is a fascinating example of the social/historical process by which Taoist skepticism and speculation regarding the origins, operations, and “reality” of order became more closely identified with the unambiguously order-affirming values of the state [e.g., Girardot 1983]. Yet the rhetoric [in the form of the construction of a cosmological reordering] employed to this end bears a notable resemblance to that developed in more recent millennial cults focused on the Unborn Mother. According to Strickmann [1978:336–37], Lin was obsessed with a region of the heavens, or beyond the heavens, called Shen-hsiao. It was central and supreme among the Nine Empyreans [chti hsiao], and its spirit-administrators controlled the furthest reaches of space. Hence the other, older Taoist orders, that derived their authority from one or another of the lesser celestial palaces, were all logically subordinate to Shen-hsiao. What is more, Lin was able to demonstrate the relevance of his revelation to the current secular regime. In Hui-tsun he recognized the Jade Emperor’s elder son, the Great Lord of Long Life, Sovereign of Shen-hsiao.19

Thus, as in the case of the Unborn Mother, a symbolic “space” is asserted to transcend [temporally as well as spatially] other orderings.20

The foregoing characterizations of Chinese orderings are consistent with a more detailed analysis of Chinese notions of order and power implicit in ritual and cosmology [Sangren 1987a]. In my view, the Chinese construction of the logic of relations among power, order, and authority provides a useful perspective for analyzing the uses of deconstructive rhetoric in current Western intellectual discourse. I shall not attempt an elaborate argument to this effect here. To reiterate my point, an analysis of this type can constitute a more truly dialogic method than those that invoke the authority of the “other’s voice” per se, even though the authority I invoke is still “logocentric,” Western, and—broadly—scientific.

Both the Unborn Mother and Shen-hsiao are transcendent symbols that at once appropriate the ordering power of conventional, orthodox, or preexisting ideologies and, by the same rhetoric, usurp their authority. The “space” they occupy is analogous to the “space” created for postmodern ethnography in the rhetoric of its proponents. As Tyler [1986] notes, this “space” cannot possibly exist except as an ideal. What he does not note, however, is that it must nonetheless be constructed in order to legitimate the metaethnography of its proponents and at the same time to appropriate the authority of conventional ethnography. [It is noteworthy in this regard that the quantity of publication discussing the

19. Just as Lin discovered a new heaven transcendent over the heavens invoked by earlier Taoists, so do intellectuals commonly find in the writings of obscure and overlooked scholars the ideas that enable them to outflank more traditional authorities and the present-day scholars who invoke them (note the recent popularity of Bakhtin).

20. The emperor Hui-tsun subsequently initiated an active anti-Buddhist policy. However, unlike earlier T’ang emperors, Hui-tsun did not force Buddhist monks and nuns to return to lay life. Instead, “a more subtle and thoroughgoing sinification could be effected simply by purging [Buddhism] of its more conspicuous remaining alien elements, including all the terminology that maintained its separate identity within the state” [Strickmann 1978:347]. This was accomplished by requiring a “rectification” of names consistent with Lin’s reconstructed cosmology: “As Taoist priests were called tao-shih, ‘scholars of the Tao,’ henceforth monks were to be called by the complementary title ‘scholars of virtue’ (te-shih); they were to be known by their secular names and to adopt Taoist garb and hair style. The historical Buddha was termed ‘Golden Immortal of the Great Awakening,’ Arhats styled ‘immortals,’ Bodhisattvas ‘great ones’ (ta-shih).’ This case brings to mind the substitution of Marxist terms such as ‘relations of production’ for ‘social structure’ (or of ‘discourse’ for ‘culture’) in ethnographies that are otherwise very similar.
characteristics or ideals of postmodern ethnography seems to exceed the quantity of such ethnographic writing itself.)

In sum, the fabrication of a “decentered” center allows postmodernists to appropriate the “partial” truths of predecessors, even when these “truths” are logically ir reconcilable with the rhetoric by which they have been appropriated (see, e.g., Marcus’s appropriation of Marxist approaches to political economy as “background” to the “literary/semiotic,” “symbolic,” and “experiential” rhetoric with which he is more at home).

Although arguments like Clifford’s, Marcus’s, and Tyler’s grant other approaches or epistemologies a proximate or partial legitimacy (encompassed within the negative assertion of an encompassing epistemology), this eclecticism or pluralism—like Hui-tsung’s appropriation and hierarchical reordering of Buddhist thought (see n. 20) and institutions—is misleading. As the sectarian constructs a space both “beyond” and “above” conventional orderings, postmodern ethnography places its proponents in a privileged position relative to contending viewpoints through the strategem of denying the legitimacy of such privileges.

Other Rhetorics of Power

An unacknowledged [hence masked] desire for power is also evident in other rhetorical techniques employed by advocates of postmodern or experimental ethnography. I have alluded to some of these above. One of the most effective amounts to a kind of demonology. The creation of the category “postmodern” itself necessarily creates an “other.” Yet despite their invocation of writers like Derrida and Foucault, the advocates of postmodern ethnography are surprisingly unleveled about their own rhetoric of power in this regard. In seeking to inoculate his argument against the same rhetorical techniques it employs, Clifford, for example, unselfconsciously indulges in creating such a demonic other (1986a:7): “Ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial—committed and incomplete. This point is now widely asserted—and resisted at strategic points by those who fear the collapse of clear standards of verification. But once accepted and built into ethnographic art, a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact.” Those who do not submit to Clifford’s argument are rhetorically grouped in a category of unselconscious, totalizing positivists. It goes without saying that a few anthropologists like to think of themselves in such terms. Masked in this statement, however, is the unargued assertion that those who believe that there exists a social and cultural reality about which ethnography aspires to communicate “truths” are so deluded as to think that their attempts to communicate that truth are identical to it. Few anthropologists, even among those of quite self-consciously positivist leanings, really belong in such a category. By drawing the line between insiders and outsiders as he does, however, Clifford makes a rhetorically convincing case that is at once a creation of authorial power and an argument that masks or mystifies its own logical flaws and will to power (see also Marcus and Cushman’s [1982:58] contrast between “sophisticated” ethnographers and “realists” who insist on “absolutist” standards).

It is ironic that Clifford employs the rhetorical technique of creating a problematically defined other, because he also employs the technique of subverting such distinctions. To return to the preceding quotation, Clifford certainly does not intend to imply that those [we] who accept the “partial” [in my view, a better term is “contingent”) character of ethnographic description must also wish to abandon “clear standards of verification” [although he remains vague regarding the possibility of defining these]. Indeed, he explicitly employs the technique of denying such an unwarranted creation of this other “other,” “we.”

In sum, Clifford both employs the technique of fabricating a mystifying “other” where it suits his rhetorical purposes and demystifies such fabrications as another rhetorical step in the fabrication of his own authority. Rhetoric aside [which is, of course, impossible], it is entirely possible, indeed it is the dominant stance in cultural anthropology, to accept the inherent limits of ethnographic texts to “represent” reality [and especially any reality from another’s point of view] and simultaneously to claim that there are such realities. Perhaps Clifford would not contest this assertion, but the rhetoric of his text, in its own masked way, depends on its denial.

A related rhetorical technique, clearest once again in Clifford’s prose, is the attempt to coopt imagined contestants by defining one’s position as essentially incontestable. The rhetorical fabrication of the contestant as demonic other attempts in advance to discourage readers from contesting. One way this is accomplished is by a straightforward assertion that many of the legitimate objections that come most readily to mind are beside the point (e.g., “The authors in this volume do not suggest that one cultural account is as good as any other. If they espoused so trivial and self-refuting a relativism, they would not have gone to the trouble of writing detailed, committed, critical studies” [Clifford 1986a:24]).

Rhetorical flourishes such as the frequent usage of terms like “detailed, committed” and, in related contexts, “rigorous partiality” (oxymoronic!) and “more subtle, 21. The fact that many advocates of postmodernism find it necessary to dismiss explicitly and frequently a total departure from “standards” while at the same time espousing polyphony, decenteredness, and utopian spaces (which somehow substitute for such standards by denying their possibility) is similar to the frequent proclamations of allegiance to filial piety one finds in the publications and pronouncements of heterodox Chinese sects. Even though sectarian iconography and ideology undermine the philosophical foundations of hierarchical orderings that are, in turn, basic to filial piety, this implication is explicitly denied. I believe it cannot be denied; its denial is necessary to assure both sectarians themselves and suspicious authorities that, despite appearances, heterodox ideologies do not challenge order categorically—in other words, that the promise of utopian subversion of order as a means to direct access to celestial power unmediated by hierarchical institutions can be reconciled with filial piety, even though logically it cannot. Not even the sectarians can forgo the pleasures of order entirely.
concrete” applied to the efforts of the in-group similarly substitute assertion for argument. In the latter case, the assertion is accompanied by the implication that Clifford’s kind of ethnography will lead to “new conceptions of culture as interactive and historical” [1986a:25] as though contestants could not lay claim to similar ambitions and even accomplishments.

In another passage [p. 20] Clifford writes, “If there is a common resistance to the recognition of allegory, a fear that it leads to a nihilism of reading, this is not a realistic fear. It confuses contests for meaning with disorder. And often it reflects a wish to preserve an ‘objective’ rhetoric, refusing to locate its own mode of production within inventive culture and historical change.” In this passage, the imagined contestant is psychoanalyzed as an authoritarian personality neurotically attached to a reified order. Yet the passage betrays its author’s own will to power by attempting to [allow me another postmodernist neologism] disvenoise its fabricated contestants. Viewed in this light, one wonders who, indeed, is the more fearful of contest.

Employing a similar rhetoric, Marcus calls for a new “modernist form of the essay” that [1986a:191]

opposes conventional systematic analysis, absolves the writer from having to develop the broader implications of his thought [while nonetheless indicating that there are such implications] or of having to tie loose ends together. The essayist can mystify the world, leave his subjects’ actions open-ended as to their global implications, from a rhetorical posture of profound half-understanding, half-bewilderment with the world in which the ethnographic subject and the ethnographer live. This is thus a form well suited to a time such as the present, when paradigms are in disarray, problems intractable, and phenomena only partly understood. It is finally a hedge on the holistic commitments of anthropological ethnography. The open-ended mystery of phenomena partly explained (“there are always alternative interpretations”) is an essential feature of the rhetoric of the experimental posture. Unlike realist ethnography, which can be backgrounded when the text squarely addresses great events, the modernist ethnographic essay grapples with the textual problem of how the world is to serve as backdrop once conventional techniques of realistic representation are ruled out.

This statement is a noteworthy example of how postmodernism delegitimates contest in advance by eschewing order while retaining for itself the right to juxtapose, suggest, “evoke” order. This amounts to a kind of desire for authority without responsibility. Moreover, it seems to me that the quotation reveals perhaps more than it intends to regarding the very practical advantages of the stance for those engaged in academic careers: “space” is created for young scholars by ruling out the validity of earlier scholarship [and those who practice it]; one is free to experiment and to criticize, delegitimate, demystify, deconstruct, explode, subvert, transgress, etc., any sort of “other,” real or fabricated, that suits one’s purposes, without bearing responsibility for defending one’s positions; and an openly acknowledged freedom to engage in mystification and creative self-empowering fabrication unaccountable to any challenge of logic or fact is simultaneously and summarily appropriated for experimental writers and denied to totalizing “others.”

In a recent critique of what he terms “theoreticism,” Crews [1986:38] notes a widespread tendency in intellectual circles “toward positing ineluctable constraints on the perceptions and adaptability of everyone but the theorist himself.” Such “theoreticism,” Crews argues, is characterized by “a refusal to credit one’s audience with the right to challenge one’s ideas on dispassionate grounds.” In a similar vein, Asad’s contribution to Writing Culture argues that “in order for criticism to be responsible, it must always be addressed to someone who can contest it” [1986:156]. But if conceivable contestants are rhetorically stripped of legitimacy in advance, can one thus conclude that postmodern criticism like Marcus’s and Clifford’s is irresponsible? The obvious answer to this rhetorical question is yes. Asad’s critical gaze is turned toward conventional ethnography, but his insight seems to me equally relevant to some of the rhetoric employed by Clifford, Marcus, Fischer, Pratt, and Tyler in the same volume.

Social Reproduction and “Texts”

The logic of the production and reproduction of texts is not identical to the logic of social and cultural production and reproduction as a whole. One of the shortcomings of postmodern criticism is its ambiguity on precisely this point. I believe it is important to elaborate a point touched upon earlier, the ways in which authority, legitimacy, and power are constructed in texts do not provide an exhaustive model for the ways in which they are constructed in society. Culture and society encompass texts; logically and empirically the latter are contained within the former. Nonetheless, texts [including mythologies, rituals, performances, etc.] are in some important respects freed of the material conditions [production, life and death, reproduction, competition with other societies, the “world system,” etc.] that constrain forms of social reproduction. So, too, is the native’s or actor’s point of view in some respects “free” to misunderstand both the nature of social reproduction and its own encompassment within social reproduction. Indeed, ideology may be defined as the aspect of social reproduction that systematically and inescapably embodies and reproduces such misunderstanding. 22

22. This summary of an unapologetically “totalizing” perspective on ideology as a dimension of social reproduction is necessarily assertive and condensed. The academic literature on the topic is vast, and, postmodernist characterizations of the present state of such literature notwithstanding, there is no lack of synthesizing and “totalizing” perspective in it. The works of Habermas and Bourdieu have already been noted in this regard. For two useful summaries, see Thompson [1984] and Merquior [1979]. Merquior’s [1985] critique of Foucault, a postmodernist hero if ever there was one, parallels in broader context some of the arguments raised here.
Material and logical constraints exercise an ineluctable discipline on structures of social reproduction. One need not declare allegiance to a specific model of the workings of these constraints to admit the logical necessity of their efficacy. Allow me to employ a rhetorical device borrowed from Clifford (1986b:24) in this regard by reconstituting his inverted negation: To argue that the material and logical conditions of social and cultural reproduction are the contexts in which authority and power are also reproduced does not mean that the analysis of culture and meaning devolves to a kind of scientistic reductionism. Neither does it mean that the world as understood "from the actor's (or analyst's) point of view" can be disregarded. Moreover, "texts"—including ethnographies, critiques of ethnographies, and critiques of critiques of ethnographies—are important arenas for contesting authority, legitimacy, and power. They are not, however, the only arenas, nor are they ultimately the logically and empirically encompassing ones. If one is to lay claim to making "our taken-for-granted ways recognizable as sociocultural constructions" (Fischer 1986:202), the ways in which such collective representations are reproduced in society must be addressed.

Order-constructing ideologies inevitably assert a kind of power. Yet this assertion of power is opaque or masked to those who assert it because to recognize order as an assertion is to undermine its "reality" and, thus, its legitimacy. In other words, all of our constructions of reality (inevitably ordered, whether we admit it or not) manifest to some degree a kind of circularity, the order we construct must be asserted to inhere in something other than our construction of it. Tyler (1986) invokes Gödel's famous proof to the effect that no system of logic can prove its own postulates. Nonetheless, the legitimacy of authority and social institutions rests on the assumption that such proof is possible.

Recent deconstructive impulses in Western academic circles seem in part an attempt to escape this "paradox." In my view, the insights generated by such attempts are most useful precisely in deconstructing ideological masking in "others'" constructions of order. However, when the insight that all orderings are in a sense delusions is expanded to encompass the "author/other" relationship inescapably embodied in texts and science, a confabulation of logical types results and generates the kind of infinitely recursive self-referentiality—indeed, the kind of logical insanity—that characterizes so many self-consciously "reflexive" writings.

But the "truths" embodied in such deconstructive insights are themselves encompassed by the larger truth of social reality. Arguing that social reality (as opposed to our attempts to "represent" or "evoke" it) is an ideologized delusion conflates the aggregate "unintended consequences" of individuals' social action (i.e., society) with the "actor's point of view." It also conflates society's necessarily ideologized and systematically incorrect view of itself with the actual operations of social reproduction.

Logically and empirically, ideology is a "necessarily and systematically" incorrect view of society because the legitimacy of social institutions and cultural constructions of order (united dialectically within the process of social reproduction) depends upon denial of the social and cultural genesis of that order (Sangren 1987a, Merquior 1979). Ideology as a social phenomenon is not reducible to any actor's or aggregate of actors' point of view; it is part of a dialectical process of material and symbolic relations of social reproduction. It is necessary to maintain a proximate logical distinction between analyst (author) and object (other, society) in order to effect any kind of demystification, postmodernist desires to the contrary notwithstanding. To imply otherwise is both mystifying in itself and a shirking of the responsibilities of authorship.

In light of the foregoing assertions, it seems to me that a "paradox" in ethnographic writing identified by its critics is really no paradox at all. According to Marcus and Cushman (1982:45), for example, there is a clash of two kinds of rhetoric in any experimental ethnography—that which attempts to close off an account neatly with a satisfying self-contained explanation (which is what readers expect of anthropology as social science), and that which leaves the world observed as open-ended, ambiguous, and in flux (which might be disturbing to readers, but is in part the goal or point of many experiments).

Here, the levels of experience and cultural and social reproduction are opposed as though they were alternative theories at the same level of contrast. However, if one adopts the point of view outlined above, this "paradox" disappears. Individuals' perceptions of the world are encompassed within the world, but they do not exhaust the world within which individuals live. Of course, individuals' perceptions do play an important role in that encompassing world's reproduction, but individuals' misunderstandings of the operations of that larger world (including the place of their own understanding within it) must be taken into account as part of the dialectical process that systematically reproduces both those misunderstandings and the encompassing social/cultural world.

None of the foregoing should be taken to deny that ethnography participates in the production and reproduction of ideological mystification. Of course it does! And in this respect, ethnographies, metaethnographies, and critiques of metaethnographies, on the one hand, and cosmologies that construct order-affirming heavens, order-questioning metaheavens, and encompassing meta-metaheavens, on the other, are all free to engage in a kind of logical speculation that can play an important role in the social production and reproduction [and transformation] of forms of power, authority, and value. Adversaries skilled in the rhetoric of deconstruction, philosophy, or cosmology (Western or exotic) are proba-
bly capable of creating new meta-positions that subvert the authority of any logically constructed position, including the position that all such meta-positions are illusory. In this regard, texts, the politics of language, and academic debates resemble a game of go on a conceptually infinite and multidimensional board; no captured “space” is ultimately impregnable.

But society is not a text, academic debate, imagined cosmology, or game of go, even though it encompasses and produces them all and bears some logical resemblances to them. If society were a text, then the postmodernist polemic against totalizing rhetorics might be more convincing. But society and culture are self-reproducing institutions and collective representations, and it is the material and logical property of any self-reproducing system that it be systemic. This systemicness is thus not [or, at least, not only] a characteristic of the “totalizing” ambition of a power-desiring analyst but a condition of existence of the dialectical process that is society/culture. Of course, the “system” embodied in any ethnographic text may mystify such desire on the part of the text’s producer [as Bakhtin and Clifford assert], but this is a property of texts, their writers, and the relationships between them, not of society/culture. In sum, texts and people may be free to construct illogical, oxymoronic, and infinitely regressive epistemologic utopias [and hells], and ideologies may be systematically mystifying, but societies are not.

Consequently, pointing out the “will to power” in the rhetoric of ethnography, as in Rosaldo’s analysis of Evans-Pritchard’s Nuer, is a useful exercise in the analysis of Western ideology, but it does not in itself diminish the authority of Evans-Pritchard’s totalizing portrayal of Nuer life. To imply that it does is to confuse “logical types” in the broad sense argued by Gregory Bateson. In other words, ideological masking in the language of ethnography is an aspect of an ethnographer’s culture, to discover ideology in texts, however, does not mean that the arguments they embody are incorrect. To delegitimate Evans-Pritchard’s portrayals of the Nuer, one must still show not only that his ethnography embodies a will to power but that he was wrong about Nuer culture and society [we can never legitimately claim access, as Clifford points out [1983:130], to Nuer “experience”].

In making this argument, I am open to the charge of “scientism” or “positivism” that, for example, Marcus [1986a:192] levels at Bateson [1958[1936]] [particularly misplaced given Bateson’s [1972] own more convincing polemic against scientism in the introduction to Steps to an Ecology of Mind]. But it seems to me that Bateson’s efforts at framing his ethnography in multiple contexts while maintaining an explicit allegiance to scientific totalizing are logically more robust as well as more reflexive than what Marcus [1985] offers as alternative. Identifying scientism with totalizing perspectives in ethnographic writing seriously misconstrues the goals of traditional ethnography and stems from a profound misunderstanding of the relationship between culture and the individual that enters the postmodernist rhetoric as a masked, hence, ideological assumption.

The Native’s Point of View and Individualism

In brief, the assertion that totalizing theoretical stances are scientific hinges on the erroneous assertion that conventional ethnography claims to represent exotic societies from the native’s point of view. I suspect that in this respect the critics are projecting their own legitimate desire to construct representations of native viewpoints [note the association of postmodernists with areas of anthropological inquiry like “ethnography of experience” [e.g., Marcus and Fischer 1986:62–63, 82] and the “culture of emotions”] and their frustration at the logical difficulty of claiming to do so. One thus detects a kind of love/hate relationship with the endeavor in their critical writings.

Marcus and Cushman, for example, argue that “the exclusion of individual characters from the realist ethnography probably accounts, more than any other single factor, for the dry, unreadable tone of such texts” [1982:32], and in another passage [p. 32] they argue that “because of the overwhelming concern of early anthropologists to establish culture or society as a legitimate focus for inquiry, the existence of the individual was usually suppressed in professional ethnographic writing. In his place was substituted a composite creation, the normative role model or national character.” Yet they also criticize “the realist ethnographic account” for being “almost dogmatically dedicated to presenting material as if it were, or faithfully represented, the point of view of its cultural subjects rather than its own culture of reference” [p. 34].

The identification of “realist” ethnography with the claim to represent native experience is unwarranted. Bateson, chided for his “scientism,” would have been unlikely to claim to represent a native’s point of view in his ethnography of the Iatmul. Perhaps Margaret Mead and Bronislaw Malinowski claimed to represent native views, but few “realist” ethnographers today would be so naive. These passages also imply that “realist” ethnographies inevitably posit a “modal personality” or “national character” in lieu of real individuals. In this regard, the “realist” ethnography seems to be a fabrication for rhetorical purposes. Marcus and Cushman’s assertions regarding the assumptions of “realist” ethnography certainly do not describe accurately many of the recently published ethnographies that I have read.

The assertion that “realist” ethnography must rely on such obviously problematic assumptions seems to stem from the particular kind of anthropology identified by the critics as “sophisticated.” For example, Clifford asserts that “sophisticated” anthropology, following in the footsteps of Dilthey, Ricoeur, and Geertz, is that which views “culture as an assemblage of texts to be inter-
There appear to be as many ideological radicals doing interpretive anthropology as there are doing political-economy studies, and as many conservatives and romantics on each side as well. These quotations are important because they reveal what I believe are critical flaws in the agenda Marcus and Fischer advocate. The bifurcation of cultural studies from political economy betrays a very questionable epistemology. Moreover, the bridging of this gap in ethnographic analysis requires that synthesizing conceptual/theoretical arguments be developed, not that they be abandoned in favor of "experimental" eclecticism of the sort Marcus and Fischer applaud (see also Fischer 1986:202). Marcus and Fischer's invocation of Bourdieu seems to miss the important point that much of his work attempts to develop such a synthesis of cultural analysis and attention to political economy. Moreover, the observation that some advocates of interpretive approaches are political radicals deflects attention from the possibility that the approach itself may embody and reproduce a conservative ideology, whatever the political intentions of the practitioner.

In this regard, there is a marked similarity of logical structure between the privileging of the subject in interpretive approaches and that of the "maximizing individual" in neoclassical economics: In economics, value inheres in individual preferences, and society and economy are the aggregate consequences of individuals' maximizing those preferences. However, Marx's seminal analysis of commodity fetishism in capitalist society/culture demonstrated that value inheres not in things alone or in individual preferences but in the dialectical process that links the reproduction of forms of social inequality and the production and exchange of commodities. To achieve this insight, it was necessary for Marx to construct a "totalizing" level of analysis and an authorial voice in his text, but he would have been the last to deny the historical or cultural contingency of his own point of view.

By the same token, "meaning" and "culture" are not merely the negotiations "between" subjects in acts of "communication"; such acts of communication are inevitably embedded in encompassing systems of power and meaning. These encompassing systems are related dialectically in the process of social and cultural reproduction to the "experiences" of the subjects that they encompass and that are necessary in their reproduction.

Clifford's definition of culture (apparently shared implicitly with Marcus, Fischer, Tyler, and others to some degree) privileges the subject over the social in this dialectic of cultural reproduction. Perceived paradoxes in the social scientific (scientistic?) need/desire to create closed, fictionalized, textual "representations" of society, on the one hand, and the fact that subjects have differing perspectives on the world, on the other, are the result of collapsing the dialectical relation between the social reproduction of individual consciousness and the social reproduction of society to the single level of "text" or "discourse."
Comparing postmodernist epistemological angst to neoclassical economic theory is thus more than a rhetorical attempt to discredit the former by association with what is widely regarded in intellectual circles as a transparently ideological, scientific, and (worse of all) bourgeois discipline; I believe it is not too farfetched to argue that postmodernism itself, despite all its claims to reflexivity, is a particular form of individualist, bourgeois ideology that has the social effect of reproducing and legitimating bourgeois values in institutions like humanistic scholarship in universities, whatever the political leanings or intentions of its advocates.

This assertion will no doubt seem odd in light of the fact that postmodernism is so self-consciously "beyond" if not anti-bourgeois. Yet this self-consciousness is itself based on what seems to me a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of bourgeois ideology. Thompson (1984:27) notes that, in Castoriadis's view, "bourgeois ideology is structured by a division between 'ideas' and a supposed 'real'; the 'other place' of religious and mythical conceptions is effaced, but the ideology refers to itself only via the transcendence of ideas." He goes on to note some relevant shortcomings in Castoriadis's concept of the "social imaginary," but what I wish to suggest here is that Castoriadis's analysis of bourgeois ideology, broadly characteristic of postmodernist writing, is itself an ideologized reading of bourgeois ideology that has the effect of reproducing it.

It is not the divide between ideas and real that characterizes bourgeois mystification but the idea that the real is exhausted by individual experience. Asserting the former leads to the kind of phenomenological/existential relativism characteristic of much of postmodernism with the effect that bourgeois individualism is legitimated by appropriating the authority of its own demystification.

A final observation is appropriate in this regard. I alluded above to the mythologized view of the recent history of social theory and the ethnographic genre that is apparent especially in the writings of Clifford, Marcus, and Fischer. This mythologized history takes for granted a kind of "progress" of ideas, a sort of intellectual social Darwinism, that has resulted in the current ascendancy of postmodernism. Of course, the resonance between such a taken-for-granted sociology of knowledge and Western individualism is striking—once again, especially so in a discourse so self-consciously reflexive.

The possibility that academic social (again, as opposed to textual) processes might systematically reproduce collective misrepresentations and that attention to such processes is necessary to a socially responsible metaethnography is hardly noticed, even though writers like Fischer (1986:202, 208) make much of postmodernism's responsibility for its productions. Indeed, in praising some of his favorite "ethnic" literature, Fischer implies that anthropology itself ought to employ some of the explicitly mystifying devices he finds in it. But anthropology is not (or not only) literature; its responsibility is to avoid the reproduction of ideological mystifications.

The Social and Cultural Reproduction of Postmodernism

In order to support the preceding assertions, it is necessary to shift focus from the logic of arguments in their own terms to considerations of the conditions of social reproduction of arguments—in other words, to the question of why academic arguments succeed and survive institutionally. Two of the essays in Writing Culture, by Rabinow and Asad, come close to but stop short of making the points I wish to address. Asad (1986:155) observes that "society is not a text that communicates itself to the skilled reader. It is people who speak. And the ultimate meaning of what they say does not reside in society—society is the cultural condition in which speakers act and are acted upon." In contrast to Fischer, Marcus, Tyler, and Clifford, Asad unequivocally posits a coherence in society that is independent of any particular reading of it.

Asad also argues, although this is not his main point, that an important problem for ethnography is to convey the coherence of the contexts ("cultural conditions") within which people speak. In other words, if ethnography aspires to convey the contexts within which otherwise unintelligible actions and statements make sense, the postmodernist objection that it cannot represent a totalizing reality from the actor's point of view is beside the point; no such claim need be made. Of course, some sort of "totalizing" in the sense of discerning order is necessary to convey the "coherence" of the "cultural conditions" within which actors' statements make sense, but such totalizing is definitely not from the actor's point of view—or at least not from that point of view alone. It seems to me that Asad is more cognizant of this difference than many of his coauthors.

To take the present essay as an example, my argument is not an attempt to analyze the postmodernist position from the postmodernist's point of view; it attempts instead to see how the postmodernist point of view is consistent with the reproduction of the academic institutions and values that produce and reproduce it and which it, in turn, is instrumental in reproducing—and, even more to the point, to show how the misrepresentations in the postmodernist position are reproduced and successful within academia in part because they are misrepresentations.24

Both Asad and Rabinow touch briefly upon this critical issue. In asking "How is it that the approach exemplified by Gellner's paper remains attractive to so many academics in spite of its being demonstrably faulty?" Asad suggests that the social reproduction of

24. The idea that false consciousness and ideology are best explained with reference to the ways "these creative, imaginary activities serve to sustain social relations which are asymmetrical with regard to the organization of power" (Thompson 1984:6) in an encompassing process of social reproduction need not lead to epistemological pessimism. Note, for example, Habermas's attempts to outline the conditions of possibility of communicative action.
forms of knowledge in anthropology ought to be addressed. He answers his question to the effect that Gellner’s approach is popular because it is easy to learn, test, and institutionalize academically. The question of the reproduction of forms of anthropological theorizing is certainly more institutionally complicated than Asad’s brief suggestions imply, yet he identifies a more appropriate form of anthropological reflexivity than the self-congratulatory “reflexivity” valorized in a rhetorical focus on the “situation” of the fieldworker as “translator of experience” (e.g., Marcus and Fischer 1986:116).

Rabinow indicates even more precisely the implications of focusing on academic institutional contexts for postmodernist claims of “reflexivity.” He argues, for example, that there is a need to ground the “floating signifier” of postmodernism in the “relations of representational forms and social practices” (1986:250). In criticizing Geertz and Clifford, Rabinow notes that their claims of “self-referentiality” amount to little more than devices for establishing another kind of authorial authority (p. 244). He also argues that the real politics in anthropological writing is to be found not in the fabrication of an authorial voice over a textually constituted “other” but in the politics of academia (p. 253):

" Asking whether longer, dispersive, multi-authored texts would yield tenure might seem petty. But those are the dimensions of power relations to which Nietzsche exhorted us to be scrupulously attentive. There can be no doubt of the existence and influence of this type of power relation in the production of texts. We owe these less glamorous, if more immediately constraining, conditions more attention. The taboo against specifying them is much greater than the strictures against denouncing colonialism, an anthropology of anthropology would include them."

In sum, a truly reflexive anthropology would go far beyond Clifford’s textualism, in which “now ethnography encounters others in relation to itself, while seeing itself as other” (1986:23), by locating anthropology in the institutions of which texts are only a part. For all their rhetoric of “transgression,” “subversion,” and the “exploding” of realist categories and conventions, few postmodernists have been so reflexive as to examine the institutional advantages that their decenteredness confers. To bring such advantages into explicit analysis is, as Rabinow suggests, a much more subversive endeavor than attacking “realist” conventions in texts.

Several contributors to Writing Culture allude briefly to questions of tenure and related institutional considerations, implying, as in the passage quoted from Rabinow above, that postmodernism and experimental ethnography are risky stances for young academics to assume. I doubt this to be entirely the case. Even advocates of experimental ethnography like Marcus and Cushman note that “considerable rewards are offered, both in degree of publisher interest and positive critical response, to ethnographers who couch their work in more personal and novely structured ways” (1982:26). It may be true that deconstruction and postmodernism have yet to find much institutional acceptance in economics and political science departments, but for those engaged in “cultural studies” there is little professional risk involved. In fact, I suspect that adopting a radically “reflexive,” postmodernist stance has itself become a kind of orthodoxy or at least institutionally legitimate in many leading departments not only of literary criticism but also of anthropology. With Rabinow, I believe that consideration of the reasons for this institutional efficacy is necessary to be able to claim “reflexivity” for anthropology.

I do not intend to produce a detailed argument in this regard here, but some speculations are in order. I begin from the assumption that the current “moment” of experimental and postmodern ethnography is more than a natural development of anthropology consequent upon the failures of preceding “paradigms.” To explain its current popularity in academia, it is necessary to consider, to borrow a term from evolutionary biology, its fitness benefits—what professional advantages postmodernism confers upon those who advocate it and how these advantages are related to academic institutions.

Of course, these are topics that academics rigorously confine to informal arenas (e.g., gossip), and, as I have argued elsewhere [Sangren n.d.], there are some good reasons for excluding them from formal discourse. Yet the professional etiquette that prevents scholars from pointing out in their formal publications the strategic advantages for academic careers evident in adopting particular arguments contributes to the social reproduction of ideology in the guise of science. Many postmodernists might agree with this observation as applicable to, say, conventional economics, sociobiology, or scientifically quantitative approaches in sociology, but few would be so reflexive as to see a similar dynamic at work in their own more “sophisticated” circles. After all, deconstruction is in the business of demystifying; it runs self-consciously counter to the materialist prejudices it supposes to be unconsciously engrained not only in Western culture in general but in the scientism that is embedded in practically all that precedes it; how can it be viewed as ideology if it eschews epistemology? In a word, postmodernism views itself as counterideological. According to Marcus and Fischer (1986:141), “Because of the compelling hold on Western thought of the importance of politics, economics, and self-interest as the fundamental explanatory frames for what happens in social life, any effort to argue for the power of symbols, no matter how persuasively, is bound to be taken lightly if it does not seriously address or rephrase materialist explanations.” This statement reveals a notion developed

25. Bourdieu’s (1977) general theoretical perspective, especially as he has applied it to the study of French education, comes closest to the kind of analysis I am suggesting (see Thompson’s [1984:42–72] summary).

26. For relevant analysis of ideology in economics see McCloskey [1985], Thurow [1983], Kuttner [1985]; in biology, see Levins and Lewontin [1985].
implicitly throughout the discourse of postmodernist ethnography to the effect that a positivist science of symbols is impossible. Culture must be understood by something other than what we Westerners consider science. Science itself is viewed as Western ideology unaware of its own ideological nature.

Although their publications are filled with explicit disavowals, I believe that postmodernist critics confuse science as critical judgment with science as revealed authority. I also believe that they take materialism as the ideological, taken-for-granted fundamental of Western scientism. As I argue above, an even more fundamental taken-for-granted is the Western notion that the social and cultural are explainable with reference to subjects, individuals, and “experience.” In this latter sense, much of postmodern thought is every bit as ideological and Western as the forms of scientism and materialism it attempts to subvert.

For example, few critics of ideology would disagree that neoclassical economics and biology, for example, often invoke science as authority rather than as a criterion for selecting among competing explanations. This invocation of science as authority and the correlative assumption that current theory or thinking absolutely and finally describes the world as it “really is” is scientism. Scientism is often accompanied by fetishizing mechanistic or quantitative methodologies as in formal economics or statistical sociology, but such methodologies in themselves are not necessarily scientific. However, invoking the authority of science as selection criterion is not scientism. A veiled implication of postmodernist advocates is that all invocation of scientific authority is materialistic and scientific, hence, ideological and at some level mystifying.

The foregoing arguments attempt to specify what I see as some of the shortcomings of this conflation of science and scientism in the writings of advocates of postmodernism. Here I wish to draw attention to the institutional consequences of this conflation. The most important of these is that anthropology is defined as a “humanistic” as “opposed” to a “scientific” discipline. Elsewhere (Sangren n.d.a) I have argued that the science/humanities contrast in Western culture, particularly as it is institutionalized in academia, is ideologically mystifying. By “mystifying” I mean that the epistemological contrast between scientific and humanistic ways of knowing masks a disguised value unaware of its own historical and cultural contingency. It is a value because the relationship between science and humanities is hierarchical.

At a general level, “science” stands for all knowledge and encompasses “humanities,” while at a lower level of symbolic contrast “science” and “humanities” are contrastively equal, encompassed within the higher-level “science” as “knowledge.” The ambivalence evident in postmodernist attitudes toward the status of ethnography as science can be seen as an unconscious conflation of these two levels and as evidence of the masked nature of the contrast as value in Western ideology. As a contrastive complementary, science is considered the domain of the incontestably real, the known, the knowable, whereas the humanities are the domain of the creatively chaotic, experiential, and ultimately mysterious. Science is essential, humanities a welcomed escape. Within the university, science commands a much larger budget, the humanities are a kind of luxury of conspicuous consumption (although perhaps necessary for validation of class status). Science specifies; the humanities evoke (e.g., Tyler 1986). Of course, few practicing humanists like to think in these terms, but by accepting the categorical bifurcation and the job he/she occupies, the humanist nonetheless contributes to the social reproduction of the valued contrast, no matter what his/her opinion of the relative values of science and humanities.

Marcus, Fischer, Clifford, Cushman, and Tyler all seem to me to manifest implicitly a contrast between ways of knowing in their polemics against “totalizing,” “scientism,” and “grand theory building” that unconsciously reifies this humanities/science contrast. Rejection of science as legitimating value has the effect of creating and legitimating a “space” for the sort of logically and theoretically eclectic humanism touted by postmodernists.

An ironic effect of eschewing anthropology’s self-definition as a science is thus an indirect institutional legitimation of the kinds of scientism that postmodernists find most reprehensible. A kind of “nonscientific” humanism (with its accompanying academic prestige, power, and positions) is legitimated by means of implicitly marginalizing anthropology and, more generally, the study of culture, symbols, and meaning within the institutionally hegemonic ordering authority, science. In other words, the social and institutional effect of collapsing epistemological levels characteristic of postmodernism is a new kind of institutionalized humanism that precludes the examination of the historical and cultural contingency of its very existence.

27. Marcus (1985:77), for example, sees Bateson’s ([1958][1936]) classic ethnography of the latmul, Naven, caught in a bind between hermeneutic and empiricist impulses. He argues that Bateson ought to have renounced the latter in favor of the former. “During his fieldwork phase he did not see that dialogue with the subject, masked or submerged in his conception of data as observed behaviors, had in effect the same status as the kind of dialogue that Bateson privileged and raised to a meta-level, that is the higher-order, analytic dialogue about the empirical world that he conducted with significant other minds as the source of development for his own thought. If Bateson had seen discourse in the field as intimately connected to all the other forms of discourse in which he engaged, he might have slipped into a full hermeneutic turn during his anthropological phase. He would then have learned quite a different lesson from his writing of Naven than he did. He would have seen the transformation of spoken discourse in the field into the written discourse of the ethnographic text as a major problem.” In contrast to Marcus, I believe that Bateson was fully justified in fabricating a metalanguage for his analysis. Had he not done so, he would have fallen into the epistemic confusion so evident when the phenomenological, existential, or “textual” levels of social existence are taken to exhaust social reality.

28. Indeed, many “humanists” actively defend the bifurcation, arguing that anthropological analysis of value is too “social scientific” to qualify for funding from sources claimed by the humanities. The effect of this defense of humanistic methodologies against those of science is another way in which the hegemony of scientism itself is institutionally and culturally reproduced.
modernist positions (i.e., society/experience, culture/discourse, etc.) and privileging the subject is to reproduce in academic institutions the hegemony of the forms of nondialectical materialisms that many postmodernists would have no doubt view as hopelessly ideological delusions.

Yet if Marcus and Fischer are correct that various forms of materialistic sciences have a firm hold on Western thought, it remains to explain how their more ‘humanistic’ approaches can also succeed in academia. I have already hinted at a part of the answer to this; the authority of science itself is defined ideologically in opposition to humanism. Crudely put, science itself requires a kind of contrastive but dominated other as a point of self-reference. The argument that cultural studies are epistemologically grounded in something different from science thus diminishes whatever demystifying threat they might pose for institutionally entrenched materialists in the very process by which they legitimate their own intellectual and institutional role.

Like Marcus and Fischer, I believe that anthropology is and ought to constitute a kind of reflexive cultural critique, unlike them, I believe that such a critique must emanate from a holistic and explicit allegiance to scientific values. Otherwise, no matter what the discipline’s explicit assertions regarding its “other ways of knowing,” it will succeed only in reproducing the hierarchically asymmetrical contrast between humanities and sciences that is one of the mystifying foundations of Western individualistic ideology.

Elsewhere I have compared the science/humanities contrast in Western culture to the yin/yang contrast in China. In brief, yin stands to yang as disorder stands to order; yet the contrast yin/yang is itself a kind of order. Hence, order, yang, encompasses the contrast yin/yang.

At the most abstract logical level, yang is hegemonic and valued. Despite its consciousness of itself as a naturalistic cosmology, the Chinese logic of order/disorder is an arbitrary cultural construction, dialectically reproduced in the process of the reproduction of social institutions and collective representations (Sangren 1987a).

The relationship between humanities and science [in Marcus’s terms, the hermeneutic and the empirical] in the West is similarly arbitrary and ideological—arbitrary in the sense that it is socially reproduced, ideological in the sense that we are largely unconscious of the fact of its social reproduction. The legitimacy of social institutions, in particular the academic division of science from humanities, is sustained only by denying this arbitrariness [e.g., Sangren 1987a, Merquior 1979, Thomspon 1984]. The logical paradox is similar to that embodied in Gödel’s proof [e.g., Tyler 1986, Turner 1984]; no logical system can prove the veracity of its own assumptions. Yet, as noted above, social institutions and ways of thought require the legitimation that they are “uniquely realistic.”

Of course, one of the most important institutional contexts within which the valued contrast humanities/sciences is reproduced is the university and the wider academic establishment. The irony of much of postmodernism is that in attacking scientism in various “cultural studies,” it enhances the legitimacy of the science/humanities contrast and diminishes the legitimacy of efforts to find holistic (I still believe it appropriate to call them scientific) approaches to the study of society and culture. One must note with alarm a potential effect of this trend: in the name of antiscientism postmodernism may achieve a limited institutional hegemony within the boundaries of humanities and social science departments, but at the same time such departments may come to be perceived by the wider university and society as irrelevant.

By “limited hegemony” I mean that many of the positive insights of recent postmodernist and, more widely, cultural approaches in anthropology are very effective rebuttals to various nondialectical and scientific determinisms. Indeed, one of the attractions of postmodernist arguments for anthropologists is that they provide a powerful rhetoric for unmasking the pretentious claims of reductionistic academics (particularly in economics and biology but also in sociology and anthropology) to be truly scientific in contrast to those who study culture and symbol. The postmodernist point that such attitudes are themselves historically and culturally particularistic and contingent fabrications would seem to enhance more hermeneutic, interpretive approaches. Especially in anthropology, where crudely ideologized interventions of economic and biological reductionists continue to have widespread appeal, any position that diminishes such stupidities has an immediate attraction. In other words, postmodernism’s trenchant critique of such scientistic delusion has obvious appeal for those who would defend the efficacy (but not, à la Sahlins [1976], the “autonomy”—nothing in human society is autonomous) of culture and symbol.

By identifying science with transparently ideological and logically circular paradigms like neoclassical economics, cultural materialism, and sociobiology, postmodernism aligns itself unambiguously with those whose careers depend on the importance of cultural studies but also implies that the legitimacy of cultural studies is based on some authority other than science. Thus, one aspect of the institutional success of postmodernist positions is the legitimacy it promises humanists against the attacks of scientific scholars who view cultural studies as “unsound” and hence of lower status than what they see as “science.”

In itself, however, this attraction would hardly suffice to explain the recent popularity of deconstructive and postmodernist forms of criticism and analysis in cultural studies. Antireductionist arguments have been made since the beginning of institutionalized anthropology without eschewing science as the discipline’s primary value. An additional factor to which I have already alluded is that postmodernists feel free to mythologize, criticize, and demystify “realist” arguments as hopelessly limited by the historical and cultural contingencies of their production while at the same time refusing to allow criticism of their own arguments on similar grounds. The scholar can have her/his cake and eat it too.
Institutionally, although undoubtedly with the best of individual intentions, an important effect of this stance is that young critics can undercut the authority and prestige of established scholars (note the patricidial treatment of Geertz in some of the essays in Writing Culture) while appropriating their best insights and at the same time inoculate themselves against criticisms of the same order. It would require an empirical study of the career trajectories of anthropologists and the relationship between these trajectories and the adoption of postmodernist stances to demonstrate definitively the institutional efficacy of postmodernism as a career strategy. Nonetheless, I believe that the proliferation of postmodernist publications suggests the existence of some competitively successful dynamic of institutional reproduction based on criteria in addition to purely intellectual considerations (note, for example, the impressive number of new books in critical theory that appear every year devoted to explication of writers like Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, et al.). Postmodernism manifests a robust institutional efficacy in this regard, and academic careers are clearly being very successfully pursued on the wings of a presumably radically transgressive and reflexive system of thought.

In sum, I believe that there is a connection between the structure of the arguments loosely glossed as “postmodernist” and the institutional success of those arguments as manifested in scholars’ careers and academic publications. The nature of this connection is no doubt very complex but includes the advantages the postmodernist position confers upon the young scholar by providing a rhetoric of delegitimation of academic authority figures and a masked legitimation of her/his own position. At the same time, the eschewal of “totalizing” theory allows the postmodernist the luxury of experimenting without taking on the responsibility for defending the logic of her/his arguments. Most profoundly, however, the privileging of the subject in postmodernist rhetoric reproduces a nondialectical, essentially phenomenological or existential view of the world that, despite its claims to radical reflexivity, is in essence a revivified form of bourgeois individualism.

Ethnographic Authority, Postmodernism, and Individualism

Any announcement of the demise of the authority of traditional forms of knowledge inevitably amounts to an assertion of a rival authority. This is as true of my critique of postmodernism as it is of postmodernism itself. Thus what I have attempted to accomplish here is not only to point out some of the logical flaws in the arguments of those who advocate a “new, experimental moment” in ethnographic writing but to turn this critique into a consideration of the ideological dimensions of anthropology in institutional (as opposed to textual) context and to make an explicit argument for science as ethnography’s authorizing value.

My method in defending science as value has been, broadly, ethnographic rather than philosophical. It is in this sense that I claim the present argument to be more reflexive than those of postmodernists. Many of the arguments in Writing Culture and Anthropology as Cultural Critique, for example, are instructive less as introductions to the current or developing state of ethnography or anthropological theory than as documents manifesting the ideological operations of anthropology within the society of anthropologists. However, this social context—academic careers, publishing, teaching, etc.—is for the most part ignored. Hence, the “reflexivity” claimed by postmodernism is a fundamentally nondialectical one, limited to the level of the anthropological text or the text produced by the critic of the anthropological text and having only superficial reference to the social contexts in which such texts are produced and reproduced and to the effects such textual productions have in producing and reproducing authority among anthropologists competing for power and prestige (not to mention positions and salaries) within academic institutions.

In sum, as ethnography of ethnography, Writing Culture and Anthropology as Cultural Critique are failures because they do not locate collective representations (texts) in the contexts within which they are produced and which they in turn are essential in reproducing. To begin to write an ethnography of ethnography, this totalizing, meta-—yes!—scientific perspective is inescapable. To suggest that it is not or that some “utopian space” can be imagined in which a liminal “communication” among cultures is possible is ultimately more mystifying than a straightforward allegiance to science as value (rather than authority), even though this value is a product of Western cultural history.

In other words, although order-questioning heterodoxies like postmodernism prevent the ossification of order-affirming orthodoxies, they cannot claim to offer institutionalizable alternatives to them. Whenever orthodox orderings are called into question—whether by Taoist subversion of Confucian hierarchy or by deconstruction of Western scientisms—a new, more encompassing ordering is implied. To suggest the possibility of institutionalizing a kind of “decenteredness” can itself be even more mystifying than the positivistic delusion of absolute reality it undermines—more mystifying because at least the appeal to scientific authority is explicit. Any analysis, including those embodied in experimental ethnographies, that reveals logical shortcomings in a conventional approach must be reconciled to a reor-

29. Marcus (1986b) makes brief mention of the relevance of attention to the social context of academic writing, as do some of the other contributors to Writing Culture. However, such considerations clearly take a back seat to the textual emphasis of postmodernism’s critical gaze. For an argument that addresses some of these issues, see Graff (1983).
dering theory that encompasses such insights. "Decentered" or "polyphonic" authority is self-authorizing and provides no explicit justification for the possibility of its own replacement. The locus of authority is thus obscured, but in my view it is in effect a call for faith in the intuition of the analyst.

This is not to say that various forms of epistemological skepticism ought to be entirely deprived of institutional legitimacy but rather that they must by their very nature remain peripheral or marginal, encompassed within the wider allegiance to science as value. In the case of "writing culture," consideration of the experience of fieldwork and the problematics of ethnographic rhetoric serves to widen the universe of our orderings, but to claim their centrality to the ethnographic endeavor borders on self-congratulatory, narcissistic decadence.

Such appeals succeed institutionally less because of their trenchant critiques of scientific mystification than because at another level they reinforce what might be termed Western "individualism." "Individualism" is an admittedly vague term, widely and disparately employed in both public and intellectual discourse. However, there is a broad, general consensus among intellectuals that Western individualism is somehow connected to what Marx termed "commodity fetishism" in "free-market" ideology; it is a value produced and reproduced in dialectical relation with Western social and economic (and academic!) institutions.

I wish to broaden "individualism" somewhat here to include the privileging of the subject or "experience" in theoretical constructions of reality. (Perhaps one could coin the term "ethnoanthropology" to imply the cultural contingency of such "theoretical constructions of cultural reality." ) Thus, for example, Marcus and Fischer (1986:82) argue that the new experimental ethnography is "the sensitive register of change at the level of experience, and it is this kind of understanding that seems critical when the concepts of systems perspectives are descriptively out of joint with the reality to which they are meant to refer."

A similar privileging of "experience" underlies Marcus and Fischer's criticism of "systems" approaches for being boring to student readers. They imply that because Western readers find systems approaches difficult and because such approaches do not "resonate" with readers' experiences, such approaches must therefore be misguided. They do not consider the possibility that their students may "relate" to ethnographies that employ various "experiential" or fictionalized "dialogic" rhetorics because such rhetorics reinforce their students' Western predisposition to "think" reality in terms of individual experience. In other words, the very success of some experimental ethnographies may be based on their comforting reification of taken-for-granted Western misperceptions.

In sum, the distaste Marcus and Fischer express for systems perspectives is grounded less in their intrinsic logical or epistemological shortcomings than in their lack of resonance with Western ideological individualism. The heady feeling that one can convey the "experience" of the exotic other by such rhetorical devices as "foregrounding" the "fieldwork experience," touted by Marcus and Fischer and by Clifford, among others, seems to me to suggest not that such techniques are necessarily superior ways of communicating understanding of exotic cultures (or "experiences") but that they may merely reinforce our own individualistic delusions. Students may well "relate" better to "experientially" framed ethnographies, but one should consider carefully the meaning of this resonance. Individual "experience" must be dialectically related to its conditions of production and reproduction in society. In short, the privileging of "experience" or the actor's point of view reproduces a bourgeois, Western, individualistic ideology.

In conclusion, allow me a widely employed rhetorical device—that of resurrecting the genius of an overlooked scholar. (One advantage of this technique is that one can claim the authority of the departed scholar without too much concern for fidelity to her/his original intentions; another is that one conveys the impression that one's colleagues have lacked sufficient insight to understand one's message even though it was available to them in the overlooked works of the departed scholar.) I have already noted Marcus's conflation of scientism and science as value in his critique of Gregory Bateson. What I would like to suggest here is that Bateson would have found little difficulty in encompassing the insight that individual experiences of the world differ within a systemically conceived, self-reproducing, immanent, encompassing order.

For Bateson, a "sophisticated" understanding of the complexity of culture and humankind's place in the universe as well as the limits of our understanding did not lead to abandonment of explicit commitment to science as guiding value, nor did it lead him to invoke science as "authority." For all their self-proclaimed angst regarding the moral and social responsibilities of ethnography, one sees little evidence that postmodernists wish to abandon the power, privileges, and salaries they enjoy as part of the academic establishment. In some ways Bateson's rigorous fidelity to science [including a rejection of the contrast between scientific and humanistic ways of knowing] was much more subversive than currently fashionable, "subversive" postmodernist stances—Bateson never held a permanent academic position until the end of his career. In his relentless and dialectical system building, Bateson saw experience both as creating social institutions and as their product and viewed social institutions and individual experience as dialectically and productively embedded in cybernetic systems of a still higher logical type.

In the last analysis, then, the authority of any ethnographic work inheres in its ability to establish a coherent and encompassing ordering of what is known about an exotic [or familiar] society or culture. Consideration of rhetoric and textual constructions of authority is a salu-
tary reminder that there is much that an ethnographer necessarily takes for granted because of her/his own historical and cultural contingency. The unmasking of such assumptions aids future ethnographers in fabricating more convincing texts. Yet the test of good ethnography is still the selection criterion of science as value. To imply that there is an alternative is perhaps the ultimate mystification. Finally, if ethnography aspires to become a kind of “reflexive” cultural criticism, as I believe it can and should, it must honestly and relentlessly locate its object not only in the texts it produces but dialectically in the social institutions in which anthropological careers as well as texts are produced and reproduced.

Sangren points out quite rightly that it is the systemic properties of social phenomena that justify the anthropological endeavour. Informants’ insights into their own society are interesting, but generally the interest lies in the extent to which the informant grasps his own social environment. There are also other issues, such as the way in which an informant’s account forms a conscious strategy for self-presentation and the anthropologist’s refutation of indigenous explanations, which have an obvious place in anthropological discourse. It must be stressed that interpretive procedures in themselves are perfectly justifiable, but to leave interpretations as ad hoc readings of individuals and situations will mean giving up all ambition to explain; if, however, we allow our interpretations to be guided by systemic thinking, we have at least the possibility of claiming some explanatory force for our musings. And again, to the extent that indigenous reflexion is what is desired, there are many other sorts of people who are equally well or better qualified to put such texts on paper—journalists, authors, and perceptive travellers generally.

Ethnography is and always has been a product linked with epistemological problems. In the end the units [and words] we use for the presentation of events and episodes experienced in the field are chosen by the ethnographer and for the purpose of his description; they imply a strategy. But there is no alternative, as social life presents not clear-cut units but endless series of fuzzy embeddings. Anthropologists have learned to handle this situation by developing terminologies and concepts that allow for flexibility, and they have come to accept that an ethnography as a corpus of data is always limited, whereas social life is essentially an infinite set. Everyone who has worked in the field knows the limits of his knowledge—and his readers will know that his authority rests on that limitation. This is, by the way, one of the reasons that the “rereading” and “rewriting” of other anthropologists’ ethnographies is such an interesting task. Ethnographies can often yield more information than the ethnographer himself has been able to retrieve—and this is a true measure of his craft. Many anthropologists will today accommodate this necessary limitation of their knowledge of a foreign culture within their notion of explanation in that the latter is taken to be a device for accounting not only for all the given data but for all possible data. New data can falsify old explanations.

Oddly enough, at least some of the ethnographically based monographs of the leading proponents of the “experimental” ethnography read very much like any conventional anthropological book. Marcus’s (1980b) study of the nobility in Tonga, for instance, is an excellent book but certainly does not provide the reader with any particular experimental insight. It will be interesting to read the full-fledged postmodernist monographs when they start appearing. Forerunners such as the work of Dwyer (1982)—a transcript of interview tapes—have been more enigmatic than illuminating.

With Sangren, I find much of the experimental postmodernist writing of considerable interest. I also share

Comments

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Sangren’s essay deserves attention in more than one way. It addresses a number of problems connected with the nature of anthropology as a social science. Most of them have been well known for a long time, but they have been revitalised by the efforts of the postmodernist movement, apparently based at Rice University. To a Northwestern European reader of a leaning generally referred to as social anthropology, the debate that emerges here seems a very American one. The close relationship between individual psychology and anthropology in the United States has no doubt paved the way for the present attempts to translate ideas from French literary criticism into a text-conscious and reflexive concern that, however, seems to have lost much of its flavour in the translation. Social anthropology in Europe has on the whole been fairly reluctant to engage in mind reading and exegesis of indigenous reflexion, and this is so for very good reasons. Indigenous introspection may be very misleading, and, in fact, linguistically retrievable information is in the cultural context fairly superficial.

Anthropologists have sought other ways to arrive at understandings of culture and cultures, and these methods are not necessarily positivistic—unless “positivism” is being used as a general term of abuse. On the contrary, most of us are well aware that we guess about societies, that our insights are temporary, often experimental in character, and in the nature of suggestions as to ways of “reading” a society. But most of us will also impute some sort of explanatory force to our suggestions. This wish to explain may well be modest, but nevertheless it will require the axiomatic basis for social observation, which is that social life is not random.
his doubts. Unless such insights as can be gained by interpretive and reflexive procedures can be framed and embedded in systemic analyses of large chunks of social materia, they can never become more than academic decorations. Perhaps this is a time when anthropology could make headway by looking inwards. Possibilities are offered by anthropologists’ developing their own tradition in confident conversation with other academic disciplines. Trendy eclectic borrowing will not provide an answer for the future.

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There is no way in the 800 words allotted to me to answer specifically all of Sangren’s misrepresentations. Limiting myself to Writing Culture, I can only urge readers to check some of the original contexts of his quotations to see how he has consistently created a rigid “position” for purposes of attack.

One brief personal objection concerning “Clifford’s textualism”: I am said to view culture as a text, suitable for translation. Never mind that my introduction to Writing Culture portrays culture as an inventive, historically contested set of processes that can never be adequately textualized or that the essay often cited by Sangren, “On Ethnographic Authority,” turns on a criticism of the culture-as-text paradigm. I do, of course, think that the textual model yields important areas of insight and blindness, and I am seriously interested in textual form. But to label these concerns “textualism” is to gloss over all complications and countercurrents—a general feature of Sangren’s paper.

His critique is almost entirely devoid of hermeneutical engagement with its objects. Readers of Writing Culture may recall that many of Sangren’s points are already clearly registered there. It is made perfectly clear, for example, that the book’s claims to authority can (and should) be questioned from several standpoints. The book encourages dissonance and debate about its own crucial assumptions. Its introduction points out biases and problematic exclusions. How does this square with Sangren’s picture of ambitious deconstructors claiming a “hegemonic” viewpoint and “inoculating” themselves against critique? Or is explicit self-limitation and openness to challenge another “sophisticated” postmodern trick?

Sangren is less concerned with Writing Culture than with a constructed position, “postmodernist ethnography,” most clearly exemplified by four writers, Marcus, Fischer, Tyler, and myself. Of this gang of four only the first three explicitly embrace postmodernism (occasionally in quite idiosyncratic ways—for example, Tyler’s concern with identity). Several of the other authors in the volume, barely mentioned by Sangren, float around in an indifferent but dangerous cloud of “fashionable” ideas (indexed by short lists of notorious French names), having occasional “Oedipal” brushes with authority figures, and the like. Rabinow and Asad do criticize aspects of “postmodernism” but of course not dismissively enough. In fact, Rabinow anticipates much of Sangren’s critique (with the advantage that he specifies which of the many contesting definitions of postmodernism he relies on, Fredric Jameson’s sweeping “culture of late capitalism”). Rabinow calls for an analysis of the institutional bases of disciplinary “success,” an analysis that Sangren promises but that, in his essay, never gets much beyond innuendo about career strategies and vague yin/yang analogies for the current relations of science and the humanities. (I’m grateful to Sangren for having clearly raised the latter, quite important, set of concrete political and historical issues, but his defense of “holistic,” “scientific” approaches—yang encompassing yin again?—seems abstract, or at least utopian, as stated here.) A developed political sociology of anthropological institutions and careers would indeed be illuminating. Despite Sangren, nothing in Writing Culture denies this, and much encourages it.

The possibility that the book might represent not a position to be marked off but rather a series of debates and evolving ideas entirely escapes Sangren. All his strategies are of containment. In his first paragraph the discipline of cultural anthropology is portrayed in a defensive stance, attacked from without and within. Edward Said serves as outsider, barbarian at the gates—despite the fact that his book does not attack modern ethnography, as Sangren asserts, but rather invokes it against a more textually based Orientalism. Meanwhile, from inside the walls, the gang of four makes its bid for institutional power, sapping the epistemological (moral?) foundations of the city. This agonistic scenario dominates Sangren’s polemic. It evades the possibility that there are ideas and political/cultural/historical changes abroad that cannot be reduced to disciplinary border wars. If a reformulated cultural science is to emerge from Sangren’s invocations of “science as value” it will have to wrestle concretely with poetics and politics in new global circumstances. (Sangren’s long critique is singularly devoid of actual examples of how science, in his definition, finally resolves ethnographic authority disputes.) Critical analysis, not exorcism, is needed. Writing Culture opens some lines for such an analysis.

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In his tendentious and muddled review of our recent essays, Sangren says he intends to defend “the traditional authority of ethnography” (“but not necessarily conventional ethnography”) and a “particular, ‘totalizing’ theoretical stance.” He does neither, apparently forgetting what he set out to do in his obsession with academic power and status. The nearest he comes to
discussing anything labelled “totalizing” is Evans-Pritchard, whose work on the Nuer (if not that on Cyrenaica) has been criticized for 30 years now for suppressing its larger political and historical contexts. Some attempt at reconstructing Marxist, Parsonian, or other grand theory might have been in order under this rubric, as in fact we advocate in our book (we do not say that grand theory must be abandoned but rather that it needs updating and reconstruction from the [ethnographic] bottom up) so as to take into account recent history, that this cannot be done merely on an abstract theoretical level. Sangren’s article is replete with such failures and misreadings.

There is little sustained, contextualized criticism in Sangren’s piece. Instead, we get mostly a patchwork of out-of-context quotations as opportunities for his own rhetoric that conjures us, our diverse colleagues, and the broad spectrum of ongoing research and writing that we document as a clique, a conspiracy of millenarians. And behind this is an unsavory, ad hominem charge of bad faith, a totally unsupported suggestion of scheming careerists who wish merely to advance themselves. Is this really what we want Rabinow’s fair criticism that the critics of ethnography have not examined academic politics and institutions closely enough to come to?

Sangren’s misreadings (beginning on his first page, footnote 1) of both the texts he cites and, by omission, our ethnographies (e.g., Fischer’s analysis of the competing discourses leading to the Iranian revolution is neither individual-centered nor internal to texts, albeit intertextual and obviously depending on semiotic “textuality”); his distortions (we do not argue for “humanism” against science: our subtitle says “human sciences”); and his conflations (of literal texts with semiotic textuality, of individual talk with dialogue and social discourses, etc.) are far too numerous to correct in a short comment. Many of his substantive “objections” are positions we have advocated: for example, we argue for the same kind of “positivism” and science, for sociological and historical rather than only textual analysis, for focus on dialogue across civilizations (China-France, India-Germany, Islam-Judaism), for the integration of political economic and cultural analysis (it is not we who drew the divide he refers to between “Columbia” and “Chicago”). In addition, we happen also to be interested in cultural variation of personhood, experience, agency, and psychodynamics. Sangren is a most peculiar anthropologist if he really insists that it is an “impossibility” to communicate a native’s point of view. As to his difficulties in reading Derrida, we would only point out that important East Asian scholars such as Harry Harootoonian and David Pollack are making critical use of poststructuralist insights and that Sangren’s admission may be an index of the provincialism of anthropology that we think needs to be left behind. The invocation of his own article on female deity cults in northern Taiwan is salutary, but it is presented in the satirical style that we described in our book as a weak form of juxtaposition—we encourage him to attempt a stronger, less superficial mode of cultural critique.

Finally, it might be useful to point out to readers new to the discussions of which Anthropology as Cultural Critique and Writing Culture are a part that a rather wide range of positions and problems is represented in them which cannot be conflated into a single “postmodern” anthropology—a term in any case which many of us use ironically or tentatively to point to particular issues or, alternatively, to explore the limits of a particular kind of argument. The ethics of writing is one such problem: avoiding poetically powerful hypostatizations that may cause damage to the people being described, providing mechanisms for the people to talk back and contest what is being disseminated about them, or providing sufficiently rich information and alternative handles for testatory interpretations within the text itself. Sangren fears and distrusts reflexivity in ethnography, especially its narcissistic turn in some recent work, but he misses entirely the diverse ways in which reflexivity may appear in ethnography—some self-conscious reflexive strategy is a virtual necessity in work that is alive to its ethical contexts. Multiple readerships and uses of anthropological ideas outside the academy make such concerns with ethics, reflexivity, and the like far more important than Sangren’s myopic concerns with power and authority within anthropology departments.

Above all, both Anthropology as Cultural Critique and Writing Culture are written as invitations to openness, diversity, and pleasure in cooperation. If Sangren feels threatened and/or excluded, it is very much self-imposed.

Sangren says: “Make ’em see too, the power of speaking of power is power” Emc9 reminds us that the dialogism Sangren claims for anthropology before postmodernism is best exemplified by Oppenheimer’s quoting from the Bhagavad Gita while watching the explosion of the first atom bomb in New Mexico, which also reminds us that postmodernism is not an “orderconstructing ideology” but the deconstructive, parodic, entropic dissolution of power.

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This article represents the beginning of the extension of the debate between modernists and post-modernists into the discipline of anthropology. In spite of the many good points made, there is, I feel, an alarming repetition of the kind of frontal engagement that virtually paralyzed the discussion in sociology and philosophy. While the sociological debate has centered around the political implications of post-modernity in all of its aspects, whether moral or esthetic, and has explored numerous hypotheses from post-industrialism to the disorganization of late capitalism in order either to criticize or to find new possibilities in the present era, the anthropological confrontation seems to have focussed ex-
clusively on the discipline of anthropology itself and on its practitioners’ careers [Rabinow]. In the more developed sociological debate as well as in this emerging anthropological conflict, the tone is competitively moralistic. No one has, strangely, made a concerted effort to understand the phenomenon at hand. Such an effort is sorely needed.

As I have myself polemicized against recent developments in anthropology [Friedman 1987a, b], I find it stimulating to see the same kinds of criticisms being made from what appears to me to be a strongly modernist position. But Sangren is after these people in a way that I think may prove to be unproductive in the long run, even if I sympathize with his reaction. He lets his guard down when claiming that the “widespread retreat from theoretically centralized and organized fields of knowledge” can be contested on the grounds that Bourdieu has had such an impact on anthropology. The statistics of intellectual change are not as important here as the fact that the post-modern trend has caught on—what else would drive him to such an attack? Almost the entire article amounts to a massive attempt to demonstrate that this post-modern anthropology is reducible to a power play, an attempt to usurp ethnographic or anthropological authority in its entirety from those who are claimed still to possess it. Sangren appears to go so far as to assert that the content of the critique of “ethnographic authority” and the plea for multivocal ethnographic textuality is reducible to the subversion of academic authority and its replacement with a new “higher” authority equivalent to attacking a theory by way of subsuming it in a higher logical type, thus the appropriation of Marx by Marcus, of the material by the textual. The academic politics involved, as Rabinow has so clearly stated, is, of course, an important issue, but the success of the content of the post-modern position cannot be accounted for in such terms. Therefore, even if it is true that this group of “anti-scientific” anthropologists uses devices that appear to place its own position at the next evolutionary stage of knowledge and sophistication, thus defeating its vulgar enemies by means of elitist, high-society exclusionary tactics, we are still faced with the problem of why it has worked.

Sangren’s explanation for the post-modern phenomenon is located in his interpretation of its focus on individual experience, the anthropology of the self. He argues that post-modern anthropology is, in its content, no more than a reproduction of bourgeois individualism. While I would agree that the recent trend (or cycle) of anthropology in general is toward a revival of a concern with the subject, the constitution of the self and experience, I fail to see that this is more a reflex of bourgeois society than the collectivist Marxist developmentalism that reduced the individual to a bearer of social relations. The latter, after all, can similarly be interpreted as a mere abstraction of the capitalist accumulation process to the scale of universal history [Friedman 1976, 1983].

Some of the keys to an understanding of the problem can be found in an important insight that is not developed by Sangren, that true dialogics is not an intratex-

tual but an intertextual phenomenon. Its reduction to the former is an expression of the collapse of a public sphere of discussion and an ensuant attempt to encompass the voice of the other within one’s own. Clifford is, of course, clearly aware of this problem. But neither is interested in the actual dissolution of the scientific community that is its condition [Douglas 1985], since both are in the moral business of trying to determine the best way of doing ethnography. The fact that the other now speaks and criticizes the anthropologist has, of course, forced the issue of dialogics. And it is clearly the case that the single dialogic text may express the attempt to recapture and thus neutralize, once more, the relation between us and them by assuming that the anthropologist can represent the other’s voice.

The core of the problem here is not that a new elite is trying to establish itself but that it has now become possible and imperative for some to attack the very foundations of scientific knowledge, including ethnographic knowledge, as a structure of power. This possibility is partially recognized by Clifford and Marcus and vehemently denied by Sangren. The crisis of Western hegemony, the fragmentation of the world system, the apparent shift of centers of capital accumulation that are at present under way have, I suggest, led to a dissolution of the self-evident modernism of the past [1987, 1988]. As anthropology occupies that locus between us and them, producing discourse that defines them as it does ourselves, the dissolution of ethnographic authority, the concern with the ethnographic act, the combined culturalization and relativization of the world not only among a small group of American anthropologists but even in England [Overing 1985] and, in a different way, in France [Lyotard 1979, Todorov 1982, Favret-Saada 1977] are a real expression of the current condition of Western identity. The post-modernization of the West, not just in intellectual terms but in terms of the ethnicization of Western Europe and America, the proliferation of new cults, urban Indians, and national roots, is a unified process of world systemic fragmentation that must be understood. Sangren, by taking up the moral combat, may find himself struggling against the windmill rather than the wind.

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Like Sangren, I am both intrigued and appalled by postmodernism. He concentrates on explaining why it is appalling. Herewith some further remarks to this end and some thoughts as to why it is intriguing.

Sangren’s main sociological argument is that the millenarian rhetoric of the post-modern critics of the authority of anthropological texts reveals that their aim is to be a successor régime. The ages and statuses of the post-modernists suggest the limits of their radicalism. Geertz, obviously, and also Marcus, Clifford, and Rabinow are already established. Established and ten-
ured scholars who attack the ancestors are feigning radicalism, what they are truly about is rebellion, a bid for the spoils of the current system, not for its overthrow. Who gets what spoils and how? Student following, collegial sympathy, and hence the rewards of readership and research money are the what. As for the how, what could better suit a bureaucratized academy controlled by the régime of paper than the “deep” insight that what is on paper does not represent the world but is the world, so to study the world all one needs to do is study the paper, the texts, the processes of their production and reproduction and the functions served by their hidden structures? The post-modernists have produced the ultimate argument for armchair anthropology.

Meanwhile, instead of the hard taskmaster of science, professors and students can learn from their colleagues in the humanities about literary devices, authorial point of view, and so on, and toy with the plausible idea that literature in general has things to teach one of its forms, anthropology. This makes anthropologists agreeable colleagues and allies against science and reason.

The millenarian rhetoric, it then follows, may be read as no more than a form of expression common among those who think that they have seen the truth and it has set them free (from an enslavement to scientism). True, their evangelising can be offensive, as in the disrespect shown to ancestors, but, after all, Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown did the same sort of thing. There was, however, an important difference: the academic cargo cult of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown offered a method of procedure and the promise of getting nearer to the truth [Jarvie 1964], whereas post-modernism offers navel-gazing (study of texts) and equivocation about truth. Were post-modernists to claim that “one cultural account is as good as any other” they would have vindicated traditional ethnography. Hence the disavowal. Yet Sangren rightly notes that some post-modernists do in fact hold this doctrine, hence the equivocation.

What Sangren seems to find intriguing is that post-modernist anthropologists have discovered themselves as a tribe, one with careers, institutions, and even a culture and at the center the institution of language. This makes anthropologists a social group like any other, and one ripe for study. Sangren concentrates on careers, whereas post-modernists concentrate on the writing of texts. Both accounts of anthropological culture are partial. There are other institutions, and the use of language in these institutions is by no means confined to writing. Little is said about the dialogic aspects of talk in the field, never mind talk in the classroom, the lecture, and the Santa Fe seminar that gave birth to Writing Culture. Such diverse forms of talk may have diverse functions and a range of possible relations to writing. Some talk, some writing, some institutions aim to seek the truth; some anthropologists also.

Why is it intriguing to view anthropologists as a society, a culture, a tribe? Why is the sociology of institutions of which we ourselves are members so titillating? The answer is to hand in social anthropology: it demystifies our own practices by assimilating them to those of others. This parallels the titillation of the anthropological study of the exotic in general, which confronts us with what seems utterly other and demystifies and assimilates it to the understandable and, eventually, the quite unremarkable.

Sangren is right to assimilate this anthropological process to what we call the scientific, namely, the extracting of explanatory order from the previously disordered, diverse, or seemingly unique. Here lies another source of both the intriguing and the appalling aspects of post-modernism: It displays hostility to previous orderings, which are identified with science; yet it itself offers an ordering, a making sense, and is thus claiming to be higher-order science. Such is the authority of science in our culture that it is subjected repeatedly to attempts simultaneously to debunk it and to transcend it. The debunking proceeds by reducing it to a crude Aunt Sally—say, “positivism” or “scientism”—which can easily be knocked down. But then it is necessary to put in its place some claim or insight that goes beyond it, that reaches a deeper form of understanding or ordering.

What is the appeal of this process? Such unmasking and transcendence is greatly flattering to the reader, who is immediately elected to the ranks of the no longer bamboozled. “Once your eyes were . . . opened you saw confirming instances everywhere: the world was full of verifications. . . . Whatever happened always confirmed it. Thus its truth appeared manifest . . . ” [Popper 1963:35]. In opposition to post-modernist debunking of ethnographic authority Sangren defends the authority of ethnography as science. Certainly this is consistent with the academic culture from which anthropology springs and to which its ethnographic texts return. Insofar as the post-modernists have exposed authoritarian elements in traditional anthropology their work is to be commended. Neither a reassertion of this traditional authority nor the authority of a new successor régime strikes me as an improvement. The best result would be substitution of a non-authoritarian understanding of science and its claims. But apparently neither Sangren nor the post-modernists have heard that some philosophers have tried to construct a non-authoritarian epistemology and philosophy of science1 (see Popper 1959, 1963, 1972; Bartley 1962; Albert 1985; Hattiangadi 1978–79; and, for an application to anthropology, Jarvie 1964, 1972, 1984, 1986).

Two benefits of such a non-authoritarian epistemology should be mentioned. The first is that it can be used to combat the historicism [Popper 1950:passim] that passes for thought in so much current writing. Historicism permits academics to write and speak of themselves as being in “subjects” that study “fields” to which are attributed “trends,” “convergences,” “waves,” “-isms,” “-ments,” “-ideology,” “post”-theses and -ths, and the like. Verifiable but not falsifiable, such

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1. Perhaps they cannot be blamed, since a conspiracy of silence surrounds Popper and his work among the fashionable, viz., Rorty, Derrida, et al.
Historicist tropes permeate Writing Culture and deserve exposure. The second benefit is that the aims of anthropology can be stated without relying on inductive images such as those of describing or representing "the experience of the other" [or of oneself]. Anthropology, it bears saying once more, is not general curiosity about exotics [including ourselves seen as exotics] the main methodological problem of which is then how we are to conduct the study, description, representation, satisfaction of this curiosity. That is not worth tenure, publication, students, time, or research money; it is hobbyism. Anthropology is, rather, a continuous tradition of debate around certain problems concerning humankind. These problems are historically structured, for the debate has been pursued continuously since the Pre-Socratics. The debate was initiated because its participants think that we might make some progress with the problems—get nearer to the truth—or, if you prefer, eliminate some of our worst errors.

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Sangren’s critique of a critique is welcome, although I am not sure that either he or those whom he criticises are either as radical or as novel as they might be. Some of the terms of their arguments are redolent of older discussions whose ghosts we might now have to leave. Anyone who can still stack up politics and economics, on the one hand, for example [if only as “background”], and then talk of something else called the “symbolic,” “semiotic,” “and so on, on the other hand, is hardly leading us into new territory. Sangren is right to point out, in his own way, that the work of some self-styled postmodernists is riddled with “comforting,” taken-for-granted assumptions and reifications of a kind which they ought, instead, to be inspecting with all the self-announced sensitivity and reflexivity that “post-modern ethnography” might properly be expected to muster. However, Sangren’s own paper implies dualities—there is something called “society,” for example, alongside something else called “culture”—which easily evoke and confirm the same categories and divides which those whom he criticises appear, in spite of themselves, to accept and reify. Much of the excitement of the whole postmodernist discussion—its rhetoric and authority, if you like—seems to reside in recensions of these enduring constructions of the world, and I cannot help having a nagging sense of déjà vu about it all.

It is not simply that many of the authors most commonly cited—Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida are among those whom Sangren picks out—were already feeding into anthropology’s “crisis,” in Britain at least, in the late 1970s and that much of what now passes for postmodernism feels already old-hat. Some anthropologists might recall what happened to structuralism. Many in anthropology found in structuralism merely a means to study the exciting ephemera that functionalism had rendered secondary. Others who, in like manner, thought it was all to do with metaphor and poetics, literature and texts, appropriated structuralism for literary criticism, where it duly took refuge and where the embarrassing party has continued for many years. In the process, some of the most far-reaching insights of structuralism, and of its mentors [notably Saussure], have been continually in danger of being lost. It would be a great pity if the insights of post-structuralism, post-modernism, or everything that has come since were similarly to be swamped within the very structures they were trying to hold up for examination. It is not, therefore, very helpful to approach post-modernism, whether to vaunt it or to criticise it, from a standpoint laden with distinctions of the social and the cultural, say, or of society and ideology, or of the politico-economic and the semiotic, and so on. Such ideas are of ethnographic, rather than analytical, interest. Self-proclaimed post-modernists tend to place great emphasis on ethnographic understanding. There seems, however, to be little ethnographic concern with the sources of their own appeal or that of those they cite. Sangren rightly urges a closer examination of the postmodernists’ own careers and a greater awareness of who and what has the “authority to define the fashionable.” He might profitably reformulate his critical discussion of the science/humanities couplet to demand a greater ethnographic interest in both the self-diminution and the titillation of “cultural studies,” calling for an examination of the enduring structures within which a focus on “culture,” however glossed [symbolic, semiotic, or whatever], has the capacity to generate excitement and within which, should it fail to understand and address the sources of its own appeal, it might easily disappear again [cf. Marcus and Fischer 1986:141, cited by Sangren, on this point]. We should perhaps ask of postmodernism a greater ethnographic and reflexive understanding of the related process by which French writers have gained their attraction in an Anglo-American world, by which French texts are readily rendered obscure or poetic in their English translation, and by which a serious rethinking of the French Left [e.g., Lyotard 1979] and various versions of its obituary might easily be transposed into so many exercises in lit. crit. or into yet more embarrassing parties with new, post-modernist guests.

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Amidst Sangren’s grapeshot polemic—surely deconstruction and postmodernism are not the same thing, it would be nice to have an occasional sustained argument [e.g., against Rorty] rather than a high-handed dismissal, the issue at hand is ethnography not anthropology, what constitutes philosophic bases today surely is more than the piety of invoking them, etc.—there is one on which Sangren and Marcus and Fisher would agree: that drawing an overly sharp line between science and the humanities is a dangerous game. In addition to the
points raised by Sangren, one might add that such a distinction leaves no room for the social sciences. The current administration in Washington has pursued a policy with strong reverberations throughout the American university system of encouraging “hard” science, especially if the presumed technological payoff is military, and “soft” humanities to shore up our “traditional values.” The response to Alan Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind is perhaps less astonishing in this context. Money for the Strategic Defense Initiative flows freely here in California; the number of new healthily funded humanities centers in recent years (Stanford, Berkeley, Irvine, and so on) is equally worthy of note. Do I need to underline that I am of course not equating the two?

My point in quoting Bourdieu was precisely to link these new discourses to their more immediate conditions in the contemporary academy. The momentary visibility and success (relative indeed) of a few (all of whom were hired for their previous ethnographic and theoretical work, completely neglected by Sangren) should not mask the fact that these voices represent an infinitesimally small current in anthropology [poststructuralists are probably numerically fewer than forestry anthropologists, not to mention forensic anthropologists]. Nor should their relative visibility mask the fact that younger or less well-known practitioners of these fledgling arts are not faring so well (the backlash against feminists and minorities of all stripes at the National Endowment for the Humanities has not been lost on many deans and faculty Moral Majoritists). Recent administrative reversals of appointments on both East and West Coasts at prestigious institutions that the uniformed might identify as hotbeds of postmodernism recommend a more precise sociological approach to our current situation than the one Sangren adopts. Finally, for all the grumpy remarks about others’ lack of social reflexivity, Sangren remains strangely silent about his own position. Merquior, whom Sangren lauds for his straight-arrow thinking, received his postgraduate training in poststructuralism in Paris as a spokesman for and employee of the Brazilian military. Merquior is perfectly clear about whom and what he represents: no “shiftiness” there.

The work in Writing Culture is the product of years of discussion and debate among friends. Scientific debate does not imply agreement; it does imply civility, acceptance of difference, imagination, and risk taking. If the discipline has ethics, surely it lies there.

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Even a newcomer to “cultural studies” can safely surmise that the vitriol of reactions of “reflexivity” arises because somewhere a raw nerve has been touched: in Sangren’s piece, perpetrators of the reflective outrage are associated with hubris, self-congratulation, narcissistic decadence, positivism, and assertiveness, to name but a few. We know that relativism brings out the religious in people. Reflexivity, it seems, brings out the venom.

What are the key sources of anxiety here? The major fear is Loss of Method: reflexivity seems to want to deprive anthropologists of the traditional means for producing news. Readers ask how they are to proceed once the foundations of ethnographic work have been undermined. A second, related fear is Loss of Object: reflexivists seem to proscribe the Other as a legitimate target for ethnography. Readers take reflexivity as tantamount to the injunction that we write about Self rather than Other. Hence the popular joke that by this route we “end up only being able to say things about ourselves.” These fears also manifest themselves in efforts to dismiss the reflexive move as non-serious. Hence the rash of current jokes (“What’s the difference between the Mafia and a deconstructionist?—A deconstructionist makes you an offer you can’t understand”) and allegations of obscurity, mystification, and use of jargon. Such moves are exemplary instances of “boundary work”: in virtue of their non-seriousness, it is said, reflexivists should not be considered proper members of the game.

Is there any justification for these fears? The point of reflexivity is not to recommend an alternative target but to question the conventions and technologies of representation with[in] which we operate. The fear of reflexivity arises because it threatens a key article of the modernist credo, that acts of representation are directed towards (or stem from) some pre-existing externalities. But anybody familiar with the large literature in the sociology of scientific knowledge will know how out-of-touch this realist epistemology is (for an introduction, see Collins 1985, Knorr-Cetina and Mulkay 1983, Woolgar 1988a). They will have seen, often in excruciating detail, how even in the very citadel of representation scientists artfully construct their external worlds. Similarly, anyone familiar with this literature will know the irrelevance for representational practice of vague guidelines like “allegiance to science as value.”

Advocates and opponents of reflexivity differ as to the range of phenomena which should be subjected to the relativist gaze. The more traditional approach involves the selective application of cultural relativism to certain limited domains of others’ activities; in this usage, “reflexivity” is by and large a methodic corrective. Thus, benign introspection and fieldwork confessions are encouraged as a means of “improving” ethnographic representation. By contrast, a more thoroughgoing and encompassing pursuit of relativism is part of an epistemological agenda. Instead of merely ironising the beliefs and practices of others, the aim is to address the more general issue of representation as it characterises all practice; here, “reflexivity” means interrogating and seeking alternatives to realist epistemology.

Sangren is perhaps correct to note a sense in which the programmatic claims of Clifford and Marcus are “unreflexive”; he is also right that relativist allegations are equally applicable to the critics themselves (the “problems” of “tu quoque” arguments are explored in depth
by Ashmore 1985). But in order to assess the significance of these observations we need a much broader grasp of the different senses and implications of varieties of reflexivity (see Watson 1987, Woolgar 1988b).

It is no use gesturing to the importance of analysis at the institutional level, as if this were somehow politically more significant, more radical, for it is the conventions of realism which support these “institutions.” Sangren makes the common mistake of supposing that the argument about textuality applies only (or mostly) to written documents (mere texts), as if other entities [institutions, science, values] somehow enjoyed a principled immunity from cultural relativism.

The reflexive argument has to be taken seriously, because the epistemological implications pose a major challenge to existing conceptions of research and scholarship. Despite differences in emphasis—in social studies of science, for example, writers have been rather more self-conscious about attempts to programmatise the reflexive turn as a movement (Ashmore 1985, Mulkay 1985, Woolgar and Ashmore 1988)—the appearance of reflexivity in anthropology is just a part of a wider, more general intellectual concern which transcends disciplinary boundaries.

The fear of reflexivity exhibited in vitriolic defences of [the sacred cow of] realism usefully demonstrates the degree of entrenchment involved, but this should not detract from the task of exploring reflexivity. Attention should be devoted to becoming clearer about the variety and significance of reflexivity, to exploring a wide range of practices and ways of “being reflexive,” of interrogating representation as we engage in it, to explicating and assessing the constraints of a whole range of conventional practices of representation as we use them, from textual organisation in general right down to the eight-hundred-word limit of this comment.

Reply

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Aijmer does not see the discussions surrounding postmodernism in American anthropology as threatening and wonders what all the fuss is about. He notes, quite appropriately, that many postmodernist insights [e.g., the provisional, located nature of our interpretations, even textual reflexivity] are well within the doxa of modernist or realist practices. He also finds a discontinuity in proponents’ descriptions of experimental ethnography and their own more conventional books and hints that skepticism regarding postmodernist promises to revitalize modernist ethnography and theory is the appropriate attitude until there is some evidence that such promises can be fulfilled.

Jarvie takes, as I do, a less benign view of postmodernism and offers some suggestions of his own regarding its current popularity. He sees in the rhetoric of postmodernism a seduction of its readers by flattering them with the promise of entry into the community of the “no longer bamboozled.” Postmodernism is not alone in employing such persuasions; so too do strongly modernist and totalizing critiques of ideology more in line with my own theoretical leanings. Perhaps more particular to postmodernism is what Jarvie sees as its congeniality to colleagues in the humanities, especially critical theory. Of course, I agree. “Interdisciplinarity” under the postmodernist agenda assimilates ethnography to depictions of cultures [or of others’ experiences] read and interpreted as texts and reflections [reflexivity] regarding ethnographic practices to questions of textual representation. This notion justifies the widespread application of literary critical methods [including deconstruction, the discovery of genre in culture and of episteme in history, and the reflexive analysis of genre and rhetoric in ethnographic writing] to ethnography. Because ethnography is thus by definition engaged in the same hermeneutic endeavor as textual criticism, interdisciplinarity is less an exchange of critical insights than an identity of methods; hence, the congeniality.

In this regard, postmodernism in anthropology seems to amount at least in part to a continuation of the interpretivist or culturalist position against which Friedman [1987b] directs his own polemic. Prepostmodernist cultural or interpretivist ethnography, however, still invokes realist epistemology and contends with competing theoretical perspectives in modernist/realist fashion. As I do, both Friedman and Jarvie see in postmodernism a kind of alternative ordering hostile to previous orderings—a characterization that Fischer, Marcus, and Tyler explicitly deny.

Clifford’s and Friedman’s reactions to postmodernism make an interesting contrast. Both argue that postmodernism in intellectual circles is linked to global historical processes and that its success cannot [at least not primarily] be understood in terms of academic politics and institutions. For Friedman [1987b], however, postmodernism is a symptom of the collapse of the scientific community, itself linked to the breakdown of modern capitalist civilization. It is an aspect of the commodification of knowledge [I like Habermas’s notion of “inner colonization of the life world” better] that cannot be resisted effectively in its own terms in academic institutions but must await political change at the global level. For Clifford, these discussions [if not postmodernism per se] seem to be less the symptoms of a cultural or epistemological disease than the basis for a possible cure. My speculations regarding what McDonald terms the ethnographic sources of postmodernism’s appeal in academic culture and institutions imbue this debate with less global significance and dignity. Nonetheless, that an alleged institutional fragmentation of global proportions [Marx and Engels were already making similar claims more than a century ago] is historically and functionally linked to [expressed in?] a postmodern fragmentation of knowledge strikes me as implausible. This is not to deny the existence of some kind of totalizing or systemic or-
dering within which academic institutions and the forms of knowledge they contribute to producing and reproducing (and which contribute to reproducing them) is linked to encompassing (perhaps even global) institutions and processes. But asserting what strikes me as a superficial similarity in the arguable fragmentation of world capitalism, on the one hand, and an alleged breakdown of modernist epistemology, on the other, would hardly qualify as a totalizing analysis or justify either Friedman’s or Clifford’s historicizing (in the sense to which Jarvie objects) of postmodernism. Perhaps Friedman develops such an analysis in the article to which his comment refers [1988], unfortunately unavailable to me prior to the deadline for this reply. In any case, such global processes would surely be mediated by the immediate institutional context of academia. Friedman’s more general point, echoed by McDonald, that little effort has been made to develop a sociological understanding of the success of postmodern stances is well taken and seems to me to be in keeping with the spirit of my own critique.

In this regard, Friedman’s assertion (seemingly more in sympathy with Marcus’s characterizations of postmodernism) that “it has now become possible and imperative for some to attack the very foundations of scientific knowledge, including ethnographic knowledge as a structure of power,” seems to be at some odds with his defense of “the discourse of privileged objectivity” as “the only thing we have that allows a potential change of perspective on reality independent of the market and the state” [1987b:168]. I can make sense of this apparent contradiction only by assuming that by “foundations of scientific knowledge” Friedman means something different from my “science as value” [more akin to his “discourse of privileged objectivity,” which, recalling Habermas, “supplies the necessary conditions for rational communication” [1987b:167]]. If by “foundations of scientific knowledge” Friedman means institutionalized structures of authority that reproduce forms of social inequality in the name of science, I would deny neither the possibility nor the moral imperative (for some) of resistance. But as he notes, such resistance [at least among intellectuals] would rely precisely on the discourse of privileged objectivity, which would thus also require defending, hence, my defense.

Woolgar is correct that polemics like mine manifest anxieties, but they are not the ones he specifies. My concern is not a fear of loss of method or of loss of object, it is rather the loss of Friedman’s “discourse of privileged objectivity,” the premise [whether acknowledged or denied] upon which both modernist and postmodernist communications depend. The polemic is thus not an instance of “boundary work” or, as Clifford puts it, exorcism; rather, it is a defense of a value that, however vaguely defined and imperfectly institutionalized, makes it possible to hope that our own “contests for meaning” might also be meaningful [either scientifically or politically] contests—something more than the “embarrassing parties” to which McDonald refers.

In this regard, Woolgar engages in some boundary work of his own. Contrary to his characterizations, realist epistemology (if I am a representative of it) does not deny that scientists construct their worlds, neither is realist epistemology necessarily antireflexive or antirelativist. In spite of my attempts to be clear on these points in my essay, Woolgar’s reading of it suggests one of the reasons debates between moderns and postmoderns so quickly reach an impasse. In this regard allow me to employ a metaphor widely invoked by advocates of postmodernism to the effect that the movement/moment can be viewed as a therapeutic process in modernism’s self-transformation and growth. The impasse arises when the realist/modernist protests that she/he does not suffer from the symptoms the postmodernist claims to perceive; the louder the protest, the more the analyst’s diagnosis of delusion is confirmed. Postmoderns have their own ways of being dismissive.

My objections are rather to postmodernist characterizations of reflexivity and relativism as though they were, as Woolgar puts it, alternatives to realist epistemology. [I assume that some advocates of postmodernism would disagree with Woolgar on this point.] In the same vein, I do not believe that my article makes the mistake of supposing that “the argument about textuality applies only (or mostly) to written documents”; were such the case I would have less to dispute. The thrust of my argument in this regard is precisely to contest the idea that cultures and societies [or, heeding McDonald, cultural-cum-social processes] are useful to be interpreted as texts to be interpreted. Like Woolgar, I think that reflexivity regarding practices is in principle a good thing, a way to improve our practices. Moreover, such reflexivity is entirely in keeping with realist epistemology if I am a realist. What my essay disputes is the idea that our practices (and, hence, our reflexivity) are problems of literary genre and representation; in other words, if anthropology is to be reflexive, let it be anthropologically reflexive.

Clifford discovers in my arguments an agonistic scenario [i.e., “the gang of four”] rhetorically designed to construct a straw man. Of course, this discovery parallels my own account of the agonistic history of the crisis in modernism employed by its critics. To argue that my use of genre ironically recapitulates postmodernistic dramas or that my attempts to deconstruct its rhetoric parody such deconstructions in general would be [to some degree] an ex post facto defenses, apparently legitimate in postmodernistic interpretive practices but carrying little weight in analysis grounded in “realist epistemology.” In any case, the virtues of [and virtuosity in] irony, parody, and contextual play in ethnographic writing and criticism are overrated. [Must I point out the oxymoronic irony internal to the preceding sentence?] By the same token, Clifford’s discovery of parody in my text and my discovery of millennial mythology in the texts I criticize suggest that such discoveries of literary form, genre, and constructions of authority are more usefully understood with reference to competition among intellectuals [and I am not absencing myself here] than as central to ethnographic practice or even to...
reflexivity. Postmoderns have a right to be annoyed (as they clearly are) by such parodying, but it seems to be a technique more central to their own method than to that of the modernism that some of their arguments, criticisms, and “experiments” parodically undermine but avoid confronting.

Clearly I have not convinced my adversaries that the values they outline for ethnography (e.g., blurring genres, contextual play, polyvocality, rigorous partiality, avoiding totalizing, etc.) are antithetical to “science as value.” I surmise that the serious charge that I misrepresent their arguments converges most significantly on this issue. In addition to the arguments added in my essay, it may be useful to elaborate why I believe “totalizing” is essential not only as the goal of some reconstruction from the “ethnographic ground up” (an unlikely scenario given the ways ethnographers are trained and construct their data informed by consciously or unconsciously totalizing theories or agendas) but also in our ethnographic productions themselves. The “science-as-value” criterion “piously invoked” in my essay, the essential taken-for-granted of realist and modernist ethnographic writing and anthropological debate, intrinsically assumes that the argument, theory, or ethnography that most coherently and logically orders the widest range of phenomena is [always provisionally] the best. Such totalizing (as in Friedman’s call for understanding the “unified process of world systemic fragmentation”) must encompass contradictions within its own constructed order. As Friedman points out (1987b:167), metaphysical assumptions may be necessary for this enterprise (e.g., regarding the existence and coherence of a world independent of our constructions or interpretations of it), but these assumptions are what make it possible. Totalizing is important in ethnography because it opens rather than closes the possibility for debate. It is pluralistic in the sense that it assumes a “space” in which would-be competitors can fashion more comprehensive and legitimate totalizations (the criterion for legitimate persuasiveness in modernist epistemology), but it also provides the rationale by which relatively less comprehensive and coherent theories can be contested and [over time] rejected. The intersubjectivity to which Friedman refers is grounded in these assumptions, implying that the fundamental objective of academic ethics is to insure the implementation of these assumptions (by no means taken for granted) in academic institutions and discourse.

It is in this sense that the arguments extolling multiple voices, fractured realities, and antipathy to totalizing accounts appropriate privileges that undermine the premises of our discourse. Fischer, Marcus, and Tyler are right that I am suspicious of claims that contestatory interpretations and obligatory reflexivity within ethnographic texts make them more alive to ethical contexts (it is not the modernist reaction that introduces the moralistic tone to these debates); my suspicion stems from the fact that ethnographic analysis can be disputed (either by the people it describes or by other ethnographers) only if it is written in contestable form. Textual strategies that focus on the act of ethnographic construction or that invoke others’ [always selected] voices do not make ethnography any less the author’s construction. They do make such constructions more difficult to contest, however, because totalizing coherence is explicitly abandoned. Can such texts really claim greater ethical virtue on this basis? I am clearly not constructing an argument against ethical and political reflection, but there is nothing inherently more pluralistic or ethical about the newly touted experimental genres. Despite their claims to pluralistic theoretical tolerance, post-modernists seem to me to assert their own truths every bit as absolutely as do the totalizers.

Surely in all of this there is power and desire. In the notion of “science as value” the desire for [or will to] power is explicit and legitimated in roughly the terms outlined above. The ways this value is piously invoked by practitioners whose own psychodynamics may repress less collectively legitimate desires, on the one hand, and by social institutions that reproduce other values (e.g., with effects of domination), on the other, warrant scrutiny and perhaps exposure. “The discourse of privileged objectivity” provides the means to accomplish this in an effectively reflexive way. In the face of the social, textual, and philosophical uses of postmodern discourse, what then is one to conclude from an assertion like “postmodernism is not an ‘order-constraining ideology’ but the deconstructive, parodic, entropic dissolution of power,” except perhaps that postmodernism does not exist in any socially, philosophically, or anthropologically meaningful sense, least of all where it is explicitly invoked?

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