Document generated on 05/02/2024 4:56 p.m.

Culture

Tryin' to Make it Real, But Compared to What?

Michael Lambek

Volume 11, Number 1-2, 1991

DE LA MÉTHODE À LA MODESTIE : FAIRE ET PENSER L'ETHNOGRAPHIE AUJOURD'HUI
FROM METHOD TO MODESTY: ESSAYS ON THINKING AND MAKING ETHNOGRAPHY NOW

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084473ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1084473ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)
2563-710X (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Lambek, M. (1991). Tryin' to Make it Real, But Compared to What? *Culture*, *11*(1-2), 43–51. https://doi.org/10.7202/1084473ar

Article abstract

I explore how comparison might look from a hermeneutic perspective. I use the discussion as a means to clarify some of the positive attributes of hermeneutics and to respond to some of the criticisms and misunderstandings to which interpretive anthropology has been subject.

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1991

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

https://www.erudit.org/en/

Tryin' to Make it Real, But Compared to What?[1*]

Michael Lambek

University of Toronto

A knowledge of our own ignorance is what human wisdom is.
(Hans-Georg Gadamer, On the Origins of Philosophical Hermeneutics, 1977. In Gadamer 1985:185).

Reality does not happen "behind the back" of language, it happens rather behind the backs of those who live in the subjective opinion that they have understood "the world".
(Gadamer, On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection. In Wachterhauser 1986:292).

I complain, therefore I am.
(Michael Walzer, The Company of Critics. Basic Books: New York, 1988:3).

I explore how comparison might look from a hermeneutic perspective. I use the discussion as a means to clarify some of the positive attributes of hermeneutics and to respond to some of the criticisms and misunderstandings to which interpretive anthropology has been subject.

L'auteur expose comment la comparaison peut être explorée dans une perspective herméneutique. Il se sert de la discussion commme moyen de clarification de plusieurs attributs positifs de l'herméneutique et comme réponse aux critiques et aux conceptions erronées faites au sujet de l'anthropologie interprétative.

This paper owes its origins to the dialogical environment at Toronto. It was written as a response both to a request by colleagues to participate in a debate on the question of whether comparison is possible; and to a colloquium presentation by Richard Lee in which he argued that hermeneutics was, as he put it, the first step on the slippery slope to the nihilistic depths of postmodernism. For the debate on the possibility of comparison my colleagues asked me to take up the negative position. I suppose they developed the topic and selected me to speak to it under assumptions akin to those of Lee, namely that interpretive anthropology presents somehow hermetic pictures of separate worlds. However I found the position I was expected to support untenable; anthropology without comparison would be the sound of one hand clapping. Hence it seemed that addressing hermeneutics as a form of comparison was (in addition to being my only option) a useful way to clarify some of its positive attributes and refute some of the criticisms and misunderstandings to which interpretive anthropology has widely been subject.

The useful question is not whether comparison is possible, but rather what sort of anthropology — and therefore what sort of comparison — we envision. We must consider the kinds of presuppositions, implica-

tions, and entailments that various ways of making comparisons bring with them. Then we can decide whether this baggage is useful for the particular interests we have in mind, or whether we have to seek comparison in another way. As Holy (1987) has recently pointed out, the shift from a positivistic to an interpretative anthropology has meant a turning away from methodological concerns with comparison for a focus on description. Yet, as the contibutors to his volume suggest, comparison can be used for purposes other than the construction of generalizations. Habermas (1971) identifies three distinct cognitive interests that underlie their respective forms of inquiry: the interest in technical control over objectified processes gives rise to the empirico-analytical sciences; the practical interest, by which Habermas means the attainment of mutual understanding, gives rise to the historical-hermeneutic sciences; and the interest in emancipation, that is "release [of] the subject from dependence on hypostatized powers" (1971:310), gives rises to critical science, notably psychoanalysis and the critique of ideology. In this essay I put aside the most common use of comparison in anthropology, that is, as a method of empirico-analytic science, and reconstruct instead its place in hermeneutics. The constitution of critical social science as a distinct entity, while it may be the most interesting of Habermas' three categories, is also the most problematic[2], and will remain the "unsaid" in my text, the space from which debate can continue (and does elsewhere in this volume).

Comparison has always been a hallmark of science and a feature underlined by the advocates of a strongly 'scientific' paradigm for anthropology. One thinks of the Comparative Method as developed by Tylor and the other Nineteenth Century evolutionists; in their different ways, of Radcliffe-Brown, Murdock, and Steward; and of various unnamed contemporary adherents to a detached, objectivizing scientific discourse. In contrast, I take anthropology to be constituted by what Ricoeur has called a dialectic of distanciation and appropriation (1976: 43-44). In this view, distanciation is only one moment in a dialectical process which cannot be wrenched from the appropriative moment without grave distortion. I address the question of how comparison might look from such a perspective on our enterprise. Can comparison be supported by (or, conversely, can it support) a hermeneutic paradigm?

My concern is with understanding cultures, that is, systems of knowledge and action. The point is, as Ricoeur put it, that the discovery of the plurality of cultures has meant the end of the "cultural monopoly" and the realization "that there are just *others*, that we ourselves are an 'other' among others."[3] [If "cultures" (Clifford 1988) or the paradigm which treats them as individual, bounded entities (cf Handler 1988), are obsolete, the terms "traditions" or "discourses" will do in their stead for my argument, although the lines of the plurality admittedly become quite different.]

Surely, one of the first questions to ask about comparison is: Compared to what? This is what Catherine Lutz does in her article "Ethnopsychology Compared to What?" (1985)[4] where she argues that the folk theories of the emotions of other societies have been compared to what is supposed to be a scientific theory of the West. But, she asks, has academic psychology ever really examined the basis of its conceptual apparatus, for example, terms such as 'anger' or 'love;' does it not make use of terms which are no different in kind from the folk terms of other cultures? Comparison is used here by the anthropologist in order to demystify the monolithic, monological, essentializing rhetoric of modern science. This is a completely different use of comparison from one that seeks to subsume the entities compared in an encompassing, privileged, and supposedly superior theoretical framework such as that of evolutionism or "cognitive science."

The fact is, that the questions we ask and the assumptions we make about the rationality of the natives — why they say what they say and do what they do — are integrally connected to the questions of our own rationality as anthropologists and as members of contemporary society. Questions about the knowledge and practice of the Other cannot be separated from questions of our own knowledge and praxis. In understanding another culture we must do it through the language of our own, but in the process of working at translation we are forced to think harder than we normally would about our own language and ideas and thus to rework them, enlarge them, or at least become more conscious of our commitment to them.

The position I am describing (or attempting to locate) is essentially anti-foundationalist ("turtles all the way down"),[5] but not thereby properly relativist, historicist, or nihilistic. Hermeneutics attempts, in Bernstein's notable phrase (1983), to go "beyond objectivism and relativism," to transcend these oppositions so characteristic of modern philosophic

debate. The result is an approach (or approaches) which might be described, in Rorty's terms (1980), as edifying rather than systematic.

Some characteristics of this position are worthy of note:

It is open. Contrary to common wisdom, one can compare apples and oranges. Comparison is immensely fruitful so long as it remains true to the initial recognition of difference. Comparability is not the same as commensurability;[6] there is no single, neutral or ultimate grid needed for making comparisons. This applies both to discourses within the same society and to those situated further apart. Just as we reconceptualize cultures as fields of overlapping and juxtaposed discourses, not all of which may be commensurable with each other,[7] so we recognize that there are no epochs, cultures, or theories so different they cannot be compared (albeit with considerable effort), even though there is no single language with which to do so. Indeed, it is precisely when discourses are incommensurable, that is, when they are not "able to be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached... where statements seem to conflict" (Rorty 1980:316), that hermeneutics is needed (ibid.:347).

It is pluralist. As Feyerabend argues, "it is possible to compare... scientific theories in multiple ways" (Bernstein 1983:73). Likewise, Kuhn asserts that there is "no neutral algorithm for theory-choice, no systematic decision procedure which, properly applied, must lead each individual in the group to the same decision" (Kuhn 1970: 200, cited in Bernstein 1983: 53). Similarly, Bateson argues against the sufficiency of any single analysis (Toulmin 1982).

Pluralism is fed by incommensurability. When two discourses are incommensurable this does not imply they are contradictory. Rather than having to choose between them, it is more likely that you will be able (or perhaps even need) to choose both. If Rorty (1989) is correct that self-creation and justice are incommensurable — that there is no theory capable of encompassing both — the implication is that a field like anthropology is intrinsically unable to produce totalizing synthetic visions. The human sciences are not religions (or metaphysics). What constitutes our discipline is our conversations (or arguments) over and around the gaps in our experience. The human condition is riven with difference and so must be the disciplines that attempt to describe and understand it.

Yet hermeneutics is not relativist in any strong sense of the term; a recognition of incommensurability attacks objectivism, not objectivity. We can distinguish better or worse (sometimes truer or falser) artistic performances or textual readings or cultural interpretations or sociological analyses or scientific paradigms in various ways and for various ends. What we cannot do is end by identifying a single, total, or absolutely "correct" one.

It is not subjective; hence its sources and products are available for inspection and contestation. In Gadamer's words, "understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition..." (1975:258). To understand, says Gadamer, means to "make [the other's] arguments even more cogent" (1975:259-60), and this happens in public conversation. The hermeneutic circle "is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding... is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the community that binds us to the tradition" (1975:261). In other words, intelligibility is grounded not "in the private sphere of a pregiven... subject, but in the public sphere of evolving, linguistically mediated practice" (Wachterhauser 1986b:6). Geertz (1973) has been at pains to make a similar point with regard to the public nature of the symbolic system subject to the ethnographer's interpretation. Hence interpretations are open to evaluation, that is, to further interpretation. The fate of Geertz's paradigmatic essay on the Balinese cockfight illustrates perfectly his own argument on this score; once inscribed in custom, ritual, public language, or written text, any given interpretation is open to constructive (as well, sometimes, as irrelevant or misdirected) debate.

It is not alienating. Unlike objectivized knowledge, understanding is not detached from the observer but constitutive of being, of praxis. As Toulmin remarks, "we can no longer regard the World simply as a View" (1982:238); the reflective thought of the spectator ('spectator' being the etymological origin of the word 'theory') is insufficient; indeed, "the scientist as spectator is dead" (1982:252). Gadamer claims:

> *hermeneutics teaches us...to see through the dogmatism of asserting an opposition and separation between the ongoing, natural 'tradition' and the reflective appropriation of it. For behind this assertion*

stands a dogmatic objectivism that distorts the very concept of hermeneutical reflection itself. In this objectivism the understander is seen ...not in relationship to...the constant operativeness of history in his own consciousness, but in such a way as to imply that his own understanding does not enter into the event. But this is simply not the case (1986: 286).

Hence understanding forms a kind of ethical know-how (practical knowledge; Aristotle's phronesis) rather than a detached scientific knowledge of what is universal (episteme) or a technical know-how (techne).[8] We understand the Other not by bracketing off our own historicity and language, whether for a transcendental position or for empathy, but by accepting and using them. While objectivism claims for the observer a detached and "purely theoretical attitude," in fact, "the possible objectivity of experiences is endangered precisely to the degree that the interpreter is seduced by the illusion of objectivism into concealing from himself the methodologically indissoluble bond to the hermeneutic initial situation" (Habermas 1986:253).

Most important, hermeneutics is dialogical. Cultures are compared not to some superior standard, but with each other, with our own (whichever these are). Let me illustrate the point. Carol Delaney (1986) argues that we can understand the Trobriand or Australian theories of conception (the so-called "virgin birth" debate), but only, and this is the critical point, when we understand our own. She claims that Leach (1967), Spiro (1968), et. al. can be faulted precisely for having failed to examine their own notions of paternity. Had they done so, they would have discovered not pure physiological and genetic theory, but a perspective that is just as contingent, just as cultural, just as biased, as the Trobriand one. As a matter of fact, Delaney suggests that the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic theory of conception is the inverse of the Trobriand one, granting all the creative power to the man, planting his seed in the field of woman. We can never gain a perspective on the Trobriand point of view, or even gain a perspective on our fascination with the Trobriand point of view, until we gain a perspective on our own.

Although she does not say so, Delaney's paper is an exemplification of the hermeneutic approach described by Gadamer (1975). Gadamer advocates dialogue; it is only by tacking back and forth between the Other and ourselves that we come to grips with what he calls our prejudices, and what anthropologists have called our culture. "Dialogue" need not be taken in its literal or most concrete meaning here, but rather in the opening of two or more traditions to one another.[9] Delaney comes to her critical apprehension of the Western model via the encounter with her field data in a Turkish village, her reading of customs and texts as well as her conversations with specific informants. Rather than Cartesian monological reflection, it is only through "dialogical encounter with what is at once alien to us, makes a claim upon us, and has an affinity with what we are that we can open ourselves to risking and testing our prejudices" (Bernstein 1983:128-9).

Contrary to the assumptions of people outside hermeneutic anthropology, and even those, such as Boon (1982), within it, this need not lead to an exaggeration of cultural differences. What strikes Delaney is the similarity between the Turkish view and the Judaeo-Christian one. Attention to the Turkish voice is what enables her to see that Western anthropologists have confused their own folk theories of conception for scientific categories. All of this is, in turn, contrasted with the Trobriand point of view. Furthermore, Delaney does not omit her own voice (which, if anything, appears rather too argumentative), and surprises us by trying to rehabilitate Malinowski.

In a sense, what an author like Delaney attempts to do is to orchestrate a conversation. Female and male Turkish villagers, Old Testament and anthropological patriarchs, Trobrianders and Roman Catholics, Delaney and her readers; all contribute to the clamour of voices. When it is well orchestrated such a conversation can be lively and enriching. However, we must be cautious not to mistake direct dialogue for the inscribed and orchestrated product that constitutes the ethnographic text.[10] As Bakhtin (1981) and others have shown, a single author can take on many voices within a text. While the objectivist error has been to represent dialogue monologically, it is all too easy for a skillfull writer, mindful of changing intellectual fashion, to represent monologue dialogically. Both are self-serving, preemptive acts which serve ultimately to silence the Other. Hence readers should not forgo their critical appraisals of works just because they appear dialogical; on the contrary, ostensibly dialogical texts demand close inspection of their representational and rhetorical strategies.

It is practical and perspectivist (Wachterhauser 1986b: 26). Delaney would like to eradicate the sexist metaphor she finds at the base of our theories of genesis. Gadamer's point, however, is in a sense

more radical. He argues that while we must continuously and publicly subject our theories to moral evaluation (through phronesis), we can never escape prejudice, in his sense of the word, itself.[11] Every position from which we look at the world is finite. This is determined by our very being, as creatures of language. It is a view based on "the insistence on the linguisticality of our access to the world." So we must attempt to replace blind or restricting prejudices with enabling ones.

Gadamer's view leads neither to relativism nor to solipsism nor to nihilism. On the contrary, because the central feature of language for Gadamer is not the arbitrariness of the sign but the engagement of speakers in conversation. Language is not the closed system of Saussurean *langue*, but open. Language does not conceal the world from us, it opens it out for us. And language does not seal our worlds off from one another; on the contrary, it makes communication possible. Speakers of any pair of different languages can always find some small spot of common ground from which to begin talking to each other. This spot is enlarged as they converse.

So, no, we cannot stand outside our own discourse. But this is not a trap because discourse itself is open, flexible, mobile, continually changing. As Habermas says, "Only dialogue-free languages have a complete order" (1986:250).

Now this doesn't mean that translation, conversation, or comparison are easy and it certainly doesn't mean that translation can ever be perfect, conversation fully satisfactory to all parties, or comparison conclusive. For Gadamer, conversations never reach final conclusions. We never arrive at complete consensus, at categorical answers. But nor do we break off dialogue. The conversation remains open, especially because history does. Our situation changes and hence our point of view. Gadamer captures this in his wonderful metaphor of horizons. Just as when we walk across a landscape our horizon shifts, so too in life, history, and thought. Moreover, our horizons expand and contract. When we read Delaney's analysis of conception theory we cannot, as she acknowledges, immediately drop the terms by which we have imagined the problem, leap to other horizons. But we can broaden our horizons, see our usage in a new way, conceive the opening of a space in which an alternative might be put into practice.

For comparison between cultures or historical eras Gadamer speaks of the fusion of horizons. This is very different from relativism. Rather than leaving each party in its enclosed world, or ranking and classifying them according to some absolute scale against which any one of them will be relative, the fusion of horizons puts the parties in the same or overlapping worlds. But at the same time, it does not put them in the same place within the world; each person scans the horizon from his own position. The fusion of horizons produces not agreement, but the clearing of a common ground, the means and necessary condition for mutual intelligibility and useful argument; the difference in the discussants' positions provides its motor.

Hermeneutics does not constrain the inquirer from staking a position. Indeed, Bernstein (1986) argues that it leads straight to praxis. But what it does do is require researchers to take honest recognition of our location. Our position is situated down on the landscape along with everyone else's. Our position may provide us with a broader or narrower horizon, but a horizon, temporal, spatial, linguistic, and conceptual, there always is. We are situated in a delimited (though shifting) actual space; we do not have the privilege of extinguishing our own horizon in romantic abdication to the Other, nor of removing ourselves to another world from which to gaze back at this one in its entirety.

Gadamer says "totality is not an objectivity to be determined" (1985:190). In the language of the hermeneutic circle, each grasp of the whole makes us see the parts differently, which in turn generates a new view of the whole. Hence, there is no finality. Perhaps this is what people of other theoretical persuasions find hardest to take about hermeneutics. (And yet surely the history of anthropology bears this out!) But the fact that conversations never reach definite conclusions does not mean that the participants are not be able to influence or enlighten each other along the way, to shift from distorting to enabling prejudices and from narrower to wider horizons. Moreover, no finality does not mean no reality. Gadamer says, "a text is understood only if it is understood each time in another way." But the paragraph continues, "the task of a historical hermeneutics was characterized precisely by the fact that it reflects on the tension between the sameness of the shared reality and the changing situation in which it is supposed to be understood" (1975, cited by Habermas 1986:263). As Wachterhauser puts it, "Just because we always understand reality from some perspective does not imply that what we un-

derstand is really our own perspective and not reality" (1986b:26); "language and reality are mutually illuminating" (29). And Jackson (1989:182) paraphrases Rorty: "The *world* is out there, to be sure, and deep within us too, ***but not the truth.***"

I can summarize the issues in the following way. When we write about society or culture we can do so in at least three grammatical persons.

First person rhetoric is monological and does not recognize difference. Hence it is noncomparative. We can consider Descartes' *cogito*. However, first person discourse can rapidly make the shift from egoism to universalism. For example, academic psychology makes assertions about human mental processes on the basis of cultural and class specific test populations (however strenuous the attempts at "random" sampling). Likewise, there are plenty of histories of Western thought that purport to be universal ("philosophy begins with the Greeks..."). First person discourse may be reflexive, but it has no Other against which to keep such reflection honest. Hence it is ethnocentric and risks being non-critical.

Contemporary examples of monological arguments can be found on the subject of altered states of consciousness, among colleagues who naively take up a subjectivist position attributing their personal experience as communion with the natives and as identical to native experience. Hence they jump to a universalism and end up preachers of the New Age, forgetting that this is a contingent product of contemporary Western society.[12] The middle ground has been lost.

Third person comparison implies a privileged, detached observer, positioned at an Archimedean or Laplacian[13] point. This is objectivism, "the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness or rightness" (Bernstein 1983:8). Method (with a capital M) is the attempt to rationally secure this framework or foundation. Gadamer criticizes this Enlightenment view of the ahistorical autonomy of rational activity: "Absolute reason is impossible for historical humanity. Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms, i.e. it...remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates" (1975: 245).[14]

To continue with an illustration drawn from the study of altered states of consciousness, third person comparisons attempt to abstract and categorize the phenomena in order to develop a general theory, for example, explaining 'spirit possession' as a product of social or nutritional deprivation or by means of some other equivalent general formula. Such comparisons ignore the fact that their sources lie in our preoccupations and ideologies (with relative status, materialist explanation, or whatever). Where the monologists lose the distance between themselves and the Other, third person comparativists are distant observers, untouched by their subject matter and ostensibly even by the contingencies of their own lives. Their feet do not appear to touch the ground.

Third person comparison is objectivist, "whereby the objectification of the other is premised on the forgetting of oneself," while first person rhetoric neglects "the tension of points of view" in its claims for an "absolute knowledge " which could articulate history within a single horizon. But in fact, "we exist neither in closed horizons, nor within a horizon that is unique" (Ricoeur 1986:312).[15]

Second person comparison is dialogical. Whether it takes the rhetorical form of complaint, it replaces universal with practical reason, the search for universal Truth with pragmatic truths relevant for specific historical, moral, and political situations. It begins with the recognition of obscurity, the admission of incomprehension, when the "naturalness" of the object comes no longer to be taken for granted. It engages the Other, acknowledging individuality and distance. It entails the interplay of our language with that of the Other; it is concerned with trying to find the resources in our language to understand initially alien phenomena without applying distortive prejudices. In the area of 'spirit possession' it produces nuanced, holistic accounts which attempt to understand how such practices are locally intelligible and to address local perspectives with the seriousness they deserve.[16] It implies that we can only understand the Other if we understand ourselves—and perhaps vice versa. All anthropology worthy of the name is at least comparative in this reflexive sense, but surely it can be much more, truly polyphonic as we bring more and more voices into the conversation.

Putting things in this way, of course, makes it all sound too easy. As Jackson notes, "just as impersonal idioms create little more than an illusion of objectivity, so too the adoption of a reflexive, first [or second] - person, confessional idiom — what Adorno called a

'jargon of authenticity' — creates little more than an illusion of sincerity" (Jackson 1989:182). Simply changing pronouns will not do.[17] Moreover, many options remain: are the addressees and interlocutors to be conceptualized as singular or plural (Fabian 1990); gendered or gender neutral; class specific or class neutral; the reader or the ethnographic subject (Paine 1989)? How can we achieve in ethnographic writing an approximation of the heteroglossic nature of oral speech and should we even be trying to do so?[18]

There are no correct (nor even any obviously "politically correct") answers to these questions; orchestrating voices is one of the moral and practical obligations — and one of the pleasures — facing each of us who wishes to practice ethnography.

Notes

* With apologies to Les McCann and Eddie Harris.

1. Earlier drafts of this paper were presented at the University College Anthropology Symposium on comparison, University of Toronto, Oct. 27, 1988 and at the panel "Beyond Objectivism" at the annual meeting of the Canadian Anthropology Society, Ottawa, May 1989. I am indebted to both audiences for their comments; from the first occasion especially to Depankar Gupta and Bruce Kapferer, who acted as official discussants, and to Alan Bewell. Joe Errington, Jacqueline Solway, Ernst Tugendhat, Aram Yengoyan, and two anonymous reviewers have also provided helpful comments on the written version. My appreciation also to Richard Lee for his good sportmanship.
2. See the debate between Gadamer and Habermas on this issue (Gadamer 1986, Habermas 1986, Ricoeur 1986). My own paper ignores the important differences between these authors. However, it is likely that in practice the three forms of science are not nearly as distinct entities as Habermas's classificatory scheme would seem to imply.
3. From "Civilization and National Culture" in History and Truth, 1965, as cited by Craig Owens 1983: 57. Lévi-Strauss makes a similar remark: "[by means of ethnology, society] recognizes that it is not at all a privileged form, but only one of these 'other' societies which have succeeded each other throughout the millenia, or whose precarious diversity still attests that — in his collective being also — man must recognize himself as a 'he' before daring to lay claim to also being a 'me'" (1976:39).
4. And more recently in her book Unnatural Emotions (1988).
5. It rejects the notion of "foundations," self-justifying starting points for human understanding, but unlike some strands of postmodernism, not the aims of understanding reality, grasping truths, or reaching consensus themselves. (See Wachterhauser, 1986b).
6. Tambiah (1990, especially Chapter 6) provides an extensive and insightful account of the debate over rationality and the "translation" of cultures with which I am in substantial agreement. However, it is worthwhile pointing out that he uses commensurability in a somewhat different and broader sense than that presented here, namely as "base agreement" (p. 125); hence for Tambiah "comparability... implies some measure of **commensurability**" (p. 125). But if commensurability refers more specifically to a common measure, comparison can take place without it, precisely by elaborate interpretation of part-whole relations, a mode of comparison Tambiah refers to as "proportioning" (p. 126). Where Tambiah claims that "no comparison between two phenomena is possible without establishing a 'base of agreement' between them" (p. 131), I would argue that comparison in my sense is precisely the process of discovering what the agreeement is as well as the willingness to proceed patiently in the hope that such discovery is possible. Comparison of apples and oranges may never attain the same order of precision as comparison of two apples, but it may well be of greater interest.
7. The concept of 'discourse' enables us to rethink our assumption of 'cultures' as internally commensurable. If there are cultures that could be analyzed as fully coherent structures built up logically from a few core axioms they are likely to be special cases. This more complex picture of culture forms the basis of my current ethnographic work on the social organization of explicit forms of knowledge in Mayotte.
8. Note the significant difference from Habermas' conceptualization of the trilogy.
9. In the discussion in Ottawa, Dominique Legros raised the telling question of how one moves from a binary comparison to one with more comprehensive pretensions. One possible answer is to point to the history of anthropology itself. A field like kinship studies grows and transforms itself precisely as it incorporates greater numbers of societies. The terms of a conversation shift as more parties join it.
10. Yet within a single work the distinction can only be relative. To attempt to distinguish "authentic" from inauthentic dialogue is to begin to slip back into an objectivist mode. Moreover, a text like Delaney's is never fully dialogical in that we do not (nor could not) hear the direct, unmediated voices of the Turkish villagers she studied. Academic discourse is controlled by academics and it is foolish and self-deceptive to suggest that our informants have equal voice

in what, in the end are our productions, fueled by our interests and ambitions.

11. Ricoeur (1986:313) clarifies Gadamer's notion of prejudice as "the horizon of the present, the finitude of what is new in its openness toward the remote.

12. The fact that these people have arrived so far as to have their organization recognized as a unit within the American Anthropological Association is, in my opinion, unfortunate.

13. Pierre Simon, Marquis de Laplace, French astronomer and mathematician, argued at the beginning of the 19th Century that if a scientist could know all the physical details concerning the initial state of the universe, he could then be able to calculate, accurately and comprehensively, its entire subsequent history. But this Omniscient Calculator must of course be able to situate himself outside of the universe (Toulmin 1982:243).

14. Third person comparison is often realist and must therefore respond to the argument concerning the "failure of the whole visualist ideology of referential discourse, with its rhetoric of 'describing,' 'comparing,' 'classifying,' and 'generalizing,' and its presumption of representational signification. In ethnography there are no 'things' there to be the objects of a description, the original appearance that the language of description 'represents' as indexical objects for comparison, classification, and generalization; there is rather a discourse, and that too, no thing, despite the misguided claims of such translational methods of ethnography as structuralism, ethnoscience, and dialogue, which attempt to represent either native discourse or its unconscious patterns, and thus commit the crime of natural history in the mind." (Stephen Tylor, "Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document," in Clifford & Marcus, Writing Culture, p. 131, as cited by Geertz 1988:136-7).

15. As rhetorical devices rather than epistemological positions, first and third person accounts may conceal their dialogical underpinnings. Thus, the fact that a work looks objectivist does not necessarily mean that it is. This tension between the mode of understanding and the textual devices used to authorize it (Clifford 1988, Geertz 1988) is doubtless characteristic of many ethnographical and historical works.

16. An example is Boddy 1989. For a general overview of approaches to spirit possession see Lambek 1989.

17. In his discussion of Rousseau Lévi-Strauss alludes to something more complex than what is described here whereby person is itself a dialectical product of the ethnographic process. Thus:

    To attain acceptance of oneself in others... one must first deny the self in oneself. To Rousseau we owe the discovery of this principle, the only one on which to base the sciences of man. Yet it was to remain inaccessible and incomprehensible as long as there reigned a philosophy which, taking the ***Cogito*** as its point of departure, was imprisoned by the hypothetical evidences of the self; and which could aspire to founding a physics only at the expense of founding a sociology and even a biology. Descartes believes that he proceeds directly from man's interiority to the exteriority of the world, without seeing that societies, civilizations — in other words, worlds of men — place themselves between these two extremes. Rousseau, by so eloquently speaking of himself in the third person... anticipates the famous formula 'I is another.' Ethnographic experience must establish this formula before proceeding to its demonstration: that the other is an I... (Lévi-Strauss 1976:36-7; cf. note 3 above).

    The sophistication of Lévi-Strauss's account invites a re-examination of structuralism which I cannot take up here.

18. Clifford (1988, especially Chapter 1) provides the already classic locus in which these issues are elaborated.

References

BAKHTIN, MIKHAIL
1981 The Dialogical Imagination, (Michael Holquist, ed.; C. Emerson and M. Holquist, trans.), Austin, University of Texas Press.

BERNSTEIN, RICHARD
1983 Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania University Press.

1986 From Hermeneutics to Praxis, *In* Wachterhauser, 1986a.

BODDY, JANICE
1989 Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press.

BOON, JAMES A.
1982 Other Tribes, Other Scribes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

CLIFFORD, JAMES
1988 The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press

DELANEY, CAROL
1986 The Meaning of Paternity and the Virgin Birth Debate, Man 21:494-513.

FABIAN, JOHANNES
1990 Presence and Representation: The Other and Anthropological Writing. Critical Inquiry 16: 753-772.

GADAMER, HANS-GEORG
1975 [1960] Truth and Method. New York: Crossroad.

1985 Philosophical Apprenticeships. (Robert R. Sullivan, trans.), Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.

1986 On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection, *In* Wachterhauser 1986a.

GEERTZ, CLIFFORD
1973 The interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books

1988 Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author, Palo Alto, Stanford University Press.

HABERMAS, JURGEN
1971 Knowledge and Human Interests, Boston, Beacon.

1986 A Review of Gadamer's Truth and Method, *In* Wachterhauser 1986a.

HANDLER, RICHARD
1988 Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Quebec, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press.

HOLY, LADISLAV
1987 Introduction, *In* Comparative Anthropology, Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

HOY, DAVID COUZENS
1986 Must We Say What We Mean? The Grammatological Critique of Hermeneutics, *In* Wachterhauser 1986a.

JACKSON, MICHAEL
1989 Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

KUHN, THOMAS
1970 The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. 2nd ed. enl. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

LAMBEK, MICHAEL
1989 From Disease to Discourse: Remarks on the Conceptualization of Trance and Spirit Possession, *In* Altered States of Consciousness and Mental Health: A Cross-Cultural Perspective, Edited by Colleen A. Ward, Newbury Park, Sage. pp. 36-61.

LEACH, EDMUND
1967 Virgin Birth. Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute for 1967: 39-49.

LEVI-STRAUSS, CLAUDE
1976 [1962] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, founder of the Sciences of Man, *In* Structural Anthropology Volume II, translated by Monique Layton, New York, Basic Books.

LUTZ, CATHERINE
1985 Ethnopsychology Compared to What? *In* Person, Self, and Experience: Exploring Pacific Ethnopsychologies, Geoffrey White & John Kirkpatrick, eds, Berkeley, University of California Press.

1988 Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and their Challenge to Western Theory, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

OWENS, CRAIG
1983 The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism, *In* The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, Hal Foster, ed., Port Townsend, WA, Bay Press.

PAINE, ROBERT
1989 Our Authorial Authority, Culture, IX:2, pp. 35-48.

RICOEUR, PAUL
1976 Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press.

1986 Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology, *In* Wachterhauser 1986a.

RORTY, RICHARD
1980 Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

1989 Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, New York: Cambridge University Press.

SPIRO, MELFORD
1968 Virgin Birth, Parthenogenesis, and Physiological Paternity. Man, (N.S.) 3: 242-61.

TAMBIAH, STANLEY
1990 Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality, New York, Cambridge University Press.

TOULMIN, STEPHEN
1982 The Return to Cosmology: Postmodern Science and the Theology of Nature, Berkeley, California University Press.

WACHTERHAUSER, BRICE
1986a Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy, Albany, SUNY Press.

1986b Introduction: History and Language in Understanding, *In* Wachterhauser 1986a.