Malinowski’s Nephews

MICHAELA DI LEONARDO


Anthropology and politics have had a difficult and contradictory relationship since the discipline was formalized at the turn of the century. The very basis of cultural anthropological research was the establishment of mutually respectful, face-to-face social relations between “primitive” people and the anthropologist—the vaunted participant-observer method. The anthropologist so sensitively participating and observing, however, usually appeared on the “primitive” stage after a ragtag assembly of other Europeans—explorers, missionaries, artists, adventurers and, of course, official colonists. Often he or she was an integral cog in the colonizing machine: E.E. Evans-Pritchard, for example, arrived in Nuerland in the then-Anglo-Egyptian Sudan at government request in 1940-41, on the heels of a pacification campaign. Thus Talal Asad noted in 1973 that anthropology was literally founded upon a “colonial encounter.”

Within the framework of that continuing encounter, anthropologists have chosen to play divergent public political roles: apologist for and adviser to empire; advocate for the oppressed; theorist of revolutionary movements and regimes. In American anthropology, Franz Boas fought against numerous opponents to establish the study of racial difference as a cultural, not biological phenomenon and to attack—in the pages of The Nation—some American anthropologists for acting as spies in Central America during World War I. During the Vietnam War, in programs like Project Camelot, some anthropologists offered information on the potential for subversion among various Third World populations in return for Department of Defense funding. Others, such as Eric Wolf, participated in the campus teach-in movement and helped establish a school of peasant studies that attacked the blame-the-victim pieties of modernization theory and interpreted peasant protest and rebellion sympathetically.

In general, though, American anthropologists have tended to perceive themselves as scholars outside, or above, the political fray, although they tend to go against the conservative, isolationist grain. Many are profoundly attached to one or more foreign populations and act as their American advocates and translators, if only in the classroom. European and American ethnographers also have done fieldwork in their own societies over the past century, but such work at present has far less cachet, despite an upsurge of interest in Native Americans and in urban American anthropology, in the 1970s. Translating the experience of “being there” for the rest of us “here,” as Clifford Geertz puts it, has been widely understood to be fundamental to the discipline.

But now the easy meanings of “here” and “there” have become problematic for a cohort of anthropologists I will label the “ethnography as text” school, after an article with that title by George Marcus and Dick Cushman. This school, of which the two books under review are very different recent examples, draws largely from literary-critical and French poststructuralist theory to focus attention away from doing fieldwork—going there, interacting with and trying to interpret the thoughts and actions of others—to the product of the fieldwork experience, the ethnographic text. The anthropologists in this school, including Renato Rosaldo, George Marcus and Paul Rabinow, want us to abandon the notion that ethnographies are scientific reports that concern humans and culture rather than whales, bacteria or black holes, and to see them instead as fictions, texts that are carefully constructed to have particular effects. Ethnographies are alive with common denominator people—individuals whom the ethnographer chooses to represent the cultural message of entire populations. And they are often allegorical, constructed to tell particular moral tales about the meaning of cultural differences and commonalities between the West and the rest.

James Clifford is known not for ethnography but for theoretical work on the meanings of ethnographic authority and ethnographic allegory. The Predicament of Culture brings together a dozen of his highly influential pieces which, except one, have appeared over the past eight years in anthologies and in art and academic journals. These articles treat a wide range of topics, from a Cape Cod courtroom trial on Native American tribal authenticity, to the Museum of Modern Art’s Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art show, to the related writings of a number of artists and anthropologists. They are united by Clifford’s broad vision of anthropology as part of intellectual and political history and by his particular understanding of the “predicament of a postcolonial ethnography.” Anthropological writing, Clifford asserts, was characterized by “a set of roles and discursive possibilities that may be called ethnographic liberalism.” The certainties of First World power undergirding ethnographic liberalism have been eroded by the rise of Third World independence and by “a drastic expansion of mobility, including tourism, migrant labor, immigration, urban sprawl.”

Clifford asserts that we in the West perceive the increasingly internationalized world as homogenizing, degrading—as losing markers of authentic cultural difference. He wishes instead “to displace any transcendent regime of authenticity” and to make us aware that all anthropological knowledge is the product of an “unruly dialogical encounter” in which anthropologist and native alike experience change. Notions of the primitive, of authentic cultural meanings, are themselves Western constructs.

In “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” Clifford addresses the structuring and implications of MoMA’s 1984 Primitivism show. He criticizes the museum’s use of African art without any consideration of its context and native meaning; museum-goers are assumed to be interested in so-called primitive art only insofar as it may have inspired the “modernist primitivism” of Picasso and the rest. But others have made this point: It is, as Clifford would say, simply an extension of ethnographic liberalism. Clifford goes further, pointing out that not only the MoMA show but the Natural History Museum’s Hall of Pacific Peoples are examples of “the rest-

Micaela di Leonardo is associate professor of anthropology, women’s studies and American studies at Yale University. She is author of The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class and Gender Among California Italian-Americans (Cornell University Press) and editor of Towards a New Anthropology of Gender, forthcoming from University of California Press.

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less desire and power of the modern West to collect the world." But cultural imperialism not only arrogates to the West the power to stockpile the material culture of the rest; in so doing it relegates non-Western peoples to a vanishing past and "airbrushes out" both long histories of Western contact and the complex, syncretistic present. "No Samoan men at the kava ceremony are wearing wristwatches" in the Pacific peoples photos, though they do in reality. Clifford asks us to imagine museum exhibits that represent the complex, "inauthentic" lives of exotic others. In one of his illustrative photos a New Guinea girl smiles up at us, bedecked with traditional headnet—and a necklace of flash bulbs.

Clifford further questions our notions of human order in his appreciative and critical review of Edward Said's Orientalism. He sympathizes with Said's project of attacking a body of Western work that defines and objectifies the East. But he points out that Said is hoist with his own petard. Said hovers between attacking others' characterizations of the (Middle Eastern) Orient, and asserting his own. And he objectifies Orientalists themselves, excluding those schools of scholarship whose concerns and tone do not fit his model of the Orientalist. In the end, Clifford identifies with Said's dilemma: "Should criticism work to counter sets of culturally produced images such as those of Orientalism with more 'authentic' or more 'human' representations? Or if criticism must struggle against the procedures of representation itself, how is it to begin? . . . These are fundamental issues—inescapably political and epistemological—raised by Said's work."

James Clifford's heartfelt concerns with the political implications of scholarly work are not necessarily shared by all "ethnography as text" conferees. Clifford Geertz, a generation older, is less a conferee than a hallowed white father or revered uncle. Geertz's early ethnographic work on Indonesia and Morocco reflected the can-throw-catch-up-with-us premises of modernization theory. He later became a founder of "interpretive anthropology," a precursor to the current movement. His vision of cultures as texts to be "thickly described" and thus "read" by the analyst has had a profound influence outside anthropology, particularly among cultural historians. But in Works and Lives, he reflects the political unconcern of some in the new school. While Clifford's and Geertz's works have superficially common interests—ethnographies as texts, a focus on the accomplishments of anthropologists of past generations—the two books are in some ways as different as chalk and cheese. Where Clifford is tortured, serious and weighted down by past scholarship, Geertz is breezy and travels light. But Works and Lives is a deceptively easy read. From the title on, with its allusions to Hesiod and Plutarch, this carefully defined "literary" study of the works of four classic ethnographers—Evans-Pritchard, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Bronislaw Malinowski and Ruth Benedict—bristles with half-acknowledged references and meanings.

On the acknowledged level of meaning: Geertz intends Works and Lives to stand as an embodiment of the utility of considering ethnographies as literary texts. He offers original and insightful readings of works long pored over. Lévi-Strauss's Tristes Tropiques is not one but many "co-occurring, competing . . . interfering texts"—travelogue, ethnography, philosophical text, reformist tract, literary polemic. "The point, the overriding point" of Evans-Pritchard's extraordinarily clear, deceptively transparent prose, "is to demonstrate that nothing, no matter how singular, resists reasoned description." Malinowski's texts project two antithetical personae: "the Absolute Cosmopolite," a figure with near-infinite "capacities for adaptability and fellow-feeling," and the Complete Investigator, "a figure . . . rigorously objective, dispassionate, thorough, exact, and disciplined." Benedict's writing goal was "edifying ethnography" and her major rhetorical strategy was the "juxtaposition of the all-too-familiar and the wildly exotic in such a way that they change places."

Ultimately, though, Geertz is uninterested in the historical bequest of three of the four ethnographers' works. He sees Evans-Pritchard, Levi-Strauss and Benedict as politically and theoretically passé. Only the contradictory romantic/scientist Malinowski's texts have historical significance for contemporary ethnographers.

Here is the hidden layer of Geertz's meaning. He is playing avuncular Hesiod the farmer, good-humoredly dispensing plowing advice to his ethnographic nephews, all the while pretending that they are not his, but Malinowski's. These poor souls, through their theoretical concern with language, power and text, have contracted "epistemological hypochondria," are suffering from "endemic "diary disease" and have thus produced work Geertz finds lacking: "author-saturated" texts suffused with a "strong..."
note of disquiet," Health, Geertz coun-
sels, can be regained by jettisoning these theoretical and political concerns, ac-
cepting the vertiginous reality of textu-
ality—"it can . . . be gotten used to"—
and acceding to a relativistic anthropolog-
ical world in which you too can produce classic ethnographies. "All that is needed is
comparable art." Ars gratia artis.

There is certainly a kernel of rather ar-
rogant truth in Geertz's sugar pill nostrums. Ethnographies are texts, and thus are more or less well constructed. But they are more than texts, they do more than simply "enlarge the sense of how life can go"—Geertz's delineation of an-
thropology's mandate. They are bound
up with the enmeshed political histories
of the three worlds, to which Geertz only
nominally attends. Consider, for ex-
ample, Geertz versus Clifford in their treat-
ment of Lévi-Strauss's work. Geertz, the
old New Critic, looks at the text and only
the text. He admires, he pokes fun, he
dismisses. Clifford, the New Historist,
ofers Lévi-Strauss's vision of the Indian in
full headress who in the 1940s sat
near him in the American Room of the
New York Public Library, taking notes
with a Parker pen. For Lévi-Strauss, the
Indian "can appear only as a survival or
a kind of incongruous parody." But Clif-
ford sets the Indian—and Lévi-Strauss
— in historical perspective, explaining that at the time the government's new Indian
policy had "actively encouraged tribal
reorganization all over the country." In
Edward Said's terms, Clifford gives us
the text, the world and the critic. With
Geertz we get only the text and the critic.

At its best, the ethnography as text
movement sets anthropological history
within many other histories—those of
evolving Western art, larger intellectual
trends and the separate but related his-
tories of colonized and now neo-colon-
ized Third World states. We gain a vi-

sion of how the West has constructed the
rest, and, perhaps more important, of
the varieties of Third World response.
What is lacking in the movement is cogni-
zance of the insights and contributions
of other groups of anthropologists who have
been working on these issues all along.
Feminists, for example, have been woe-
fully misunderstood; and the insight that
"the rest" includes not only Third World
but Western women—that the Western
Other includes gender as well as race and
class—has gone unheeded.

But most important, ethnography as
text scholars tend to dismiss those who
use a transformed Marxism to under-
stand the changing material and cultural
lives of those abroad and at home. For
many, Marxism is just another redemptive
allegory—a discarded "master narrative,"
declares Clifford. But if we cannot escape
the cultural construction of reality, no
more can we escape its sensuous materi-

al dimension. Marxist or "culture and
political economy" anthropologists like
Eric Wolf, Sidney Mintz, Jane Schneider,
Rayna Rapp and many others, are not
only concerned with how those they study
cosmologically construe food, clothing
and shelter. They also document exactly
what sort and how much of these neces-
sities are available, how shifts in global,
national and regional economies help
determine availability, and precisely how
individuals act according to their own
lights to improve their lot.

Nor can we escape our political and
economic placement at home. It is signifi-
can that ethnography as text scholars tend
to be most concerned with former French
colonies, whose present conditions have
little relevance for the evolving Ameri-
can empire, while culture and political
economy scholarship flourishes in the
United States' "backyard," the Carib-
bean and Latin America. The French con-
nection makes sense, given the theoretical
foundations of the ethnography as text
school. But it can entail, for an Ameri-
can, a lack of self-reflection, as intellec-
tual and citizen, about one's material
and ideological connections to current
imperial enterprises. Awareness of that
connection entails what C. Wright Mills
more than a generation ago named the
sociological imagination—the ability to
perceive aggregate human material and
cultural patterns. The colonial encoun-
ter, in its myriad present forms, must be
seen as more than a series of "untruly
dialogical encounters" between anthro-
pologist and native. It is also the debt
crisis, runaway shops, global factories
and U.S.-trained death squads.

Idealist purblindness, then, is the ma-
jor limitation of ethnography as text
work. Texts are political, but they do not
constitute the whole of politics. Near the
conclusion of Works and Lives, Geertz
remarks that "ethnography hasn't had to
be aware of the sources of its power"—
meaning, however, rhetorical force, not
First World economic and political privi-
leges. We need to be aware of both.


\section*{FILMS.}

\textbf{STUART KLAWANS}

\textbf{High Hopes}

\textbf{Carl Th. Dreyer}

The realist tradition has always
left itself room to admit the out-
landish, the uncanny, the fantas-
tic—witness the death by spop-
aneous combustion in \textit{Bleak House}.
Witness as well Mike Leigh's fascinating
new film, \textit{High Hopes}.

By turns droll and dour, broadly
brushed and carefully rendered, \textit{High
Hopes} is in essence the story of a work-
ing-class London family. The widowed
mother, at age 70, is starting to with-
draw from the world. The daughter—
tasteless, social-climbing, sex-starved
and mythomaniacal—lives in the suburbs
and gets along with nobody but her dog.
That leaves the film's heart and mind with
the son, Cyril, and with Shirley, his long-
term lover.

These latter two are gut-level socialists,
motivated more by class loyalty than ide-
ology. Now in their mid-30s, with Thatch-
erism triumphant around them, they have
all but abandoned the hope of politi-

cal change. Their radicalism these days
takes the form of sarcasm and an occa-

sional visit to Marx's tomb—that, and a
decency born of principle. The central
conflict of \textit{High Hopes} has to do with
whether Cyril and Shirley can maintain
their inner radicalism—call it a socially
enlightened kindness—while their out-
ward hopes die. Shirley has enough opti-

mism left to want a baby. Cyril, though,
may have become too embittered for
that, creating a situation that is only too
true to life. To a large extent the film
presents this conflict in a predictably re-

alistic manner. But then, to a large ex-
tent, it does not.

At any given moment, \textit{High Hopes}
seems ready to shift from portraiture
to caricature, from head-on drama to
oblique satire. In this it somewhat re-