
Social experience and anthropological knowledge

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The mysteries of incarnation

Some problems to do with the analytic language of practice

Angel Díaz de Rada and Francisco Cruces

This paper is an exploration of the space between words and practice.¹ We will deal with the relation between the analytic language used by the anthropologists and the social practice and experience of the people they study. An ethnography is both a process and a product. As a process, it involves everyday interactions, comprehensive experiences and local knowledge. As a product, its result is a written text intended to encourage a scientific and universalistic understanding. We will focus on the contrast between these two diverging logics, which are inherent in the anthropological task. In particular, we will explore the conceptual vacuum that appears as the researcher translates embodied practices into analytic categories.

TWO ETHNOGRAPHIC SKETCHES

Two years ago, Francisco attended a rock concert in Madrid for the first time in his life. His companions explained to him that, although hundreds of youngsters were jammed together, this concert was not a prime example of a good concert. There was no *marcha* (action; literally, 'to get going'). The singers were not really *enrollados* (letting go), and the *ambiente* (atmosphere), although not ideal, could not compare with that of other occasions they had experienced. They recalled situations when people had rushed to the front to be close to the lead singer; touching moments when the singer really gave it his all; the audience swaying and jumping around in unison to such an extent that one left 'dripping with sweat'. That was real *marcha*.

Francisco shares with many other young madrilenians a basic vocabulary to speak about ludic situations, like concerts in

general, public celebrations and parties of all kinds. *Marcha*, *ambiente* and *enrollarse* are part of such colloquial and common-sense categories. During his fieldwork, Francisco was confronted with the use his informants gave to these words in the very context of the festivals. By means of them they seemed to shape and express their experiences of joy and togetherness.

Francisco was never led to ask directly about the meaning of these words: he knew it on an intuitive basis. But, as an ethnographer, his task was to rationalize and clear up their semantic domain. What did people really imply with *marcha* or *ambiente*? To what extent could categories of this type be analytically separated from the sensations, feelings and actions of the individuals involved?

Let us begin with the second of these terms, *ambiente*. In Madrid the following joke is told. A grain of sand is making his way through the big city. After a long haul he arrives at the city edge. He finds a good vantage-point and sees the desert beyond the last suburbs. '¡Qué ambientazo!' ('So that's where it's all happening!'), he cries.

The punch line of this joke lies in its crude objectivization of what we refer to as the *ambiente* of a public situation. It rejects the common-sense notion that a party is something more than a load of people thrust together, like grains of sand in the desert. But at the same time it reflects that *ambiente* denotes a loss of personal space. For example, a concert without a good crowd, without a rush to get to the centre of the floor and close to the singers, would hardly be considered to have 'a lot of' *ambiente*.

The term *ambiente* defies clear definition. It is above all a form of metaphorical reference to what is taking place in the party. By means of such metaphor social interaction and experience are understood in terms of the air we breathe, the 'atmosphere' inside which we live. *Ambiente* describes the copresence of a quantity of people, but also the quality of the setting generated for participation. As natives of a culture in which the party situation is important, we learn to use this thermometer of its good or bad functioning. We are able to say when there are indicators of good or bad *ambiente*. We also speak about 'a lot of' *ambiente* or 'a little' *ambiente*. The concept brings into close relation the external conditions of the ritual (numbers of people, intensity and order of stimuli and actions) and its meaning. It makes us perceive the

people present as an ensemble, an integrated whole. It converts 'a lot' into 'good'.

The notion of *marcha* is an even more illustrative example of this conversion of quantity into quality. In the context of the rock concert, it is held that the *marcha* is the indicator *par excellence* of its success or failure. There are concerts with 'a lot' and others with only 'a little' *marcha*. However, people are not sure how to define it. It refers simultaneously to a form of collective behaviour and to an individual experience. For example, a singer might ask his audience, 'Have you got a lot of *marcha*?' In the same way, someone may opt not to find a place at the front because he does not feel that he has 'enough *marcha*'. Sometimes, it is said that the *marcha* 'is in the body'. Nevertheless, *marcha* does not simply evoke a subjective, individual state. It is also something which, objectively visible for the participants, is noticeable from the outside as an attribute of situations. 'There's a lot of *marcha* here' means that there are a good number of people who are exteriorizing their experience in their behaviour, synchronizing their movement to the rhythm of the music. The *marcha* is simultaneously experienced as an external stimulus and as a disposition to be active.

These, like many other similarly ineffable concepts, describe the social setting from the starting-point of synaesthetic representations and metaphors of bodily experience.² But, in carrying out this semantic rodeo, they become normalized and gain social meaning. *Marcha* describes something more than dance or movement, in the same way as *ambiente* describes something other than pressure, crowd and pushing. This something else is what we could call the 'social plus'³ which every situation geared to enjoyment produces. By means of it the quantity and the quality, the behaviour and the experience turn out to be very difficult to discern by the participant. It is in this sense that we have coined the expression 'mysteries of incarnation', in order to underline the fusion in these situations of conventional meanings and bodily movements, collective patterns and subjective conceptions and feelings.

Unlike Tamara Kohn, Peter Hervik and other authors in this volume, Francisco knew fairly well how to 'behave appropriately' in the new ethnographic context. But, was his experience the same as that of the rest of the participants in the rock concert? It could be. The point is that, to a certain extent, his analytic tools as anthropologist had little to do with his social experience as native.

Without resort to local categories, any description of the ritual process would have missed what seemed to be most relevant for the participants.

In this case, the problem for the observer was to illuminate the ambiguities of the process by means of which a set of collective, stereotyped and recurrent actions become experience for those who participate in it. Labels such as *ambiente* and *marcha* point to such practical and ambiguous incarnation, which only reveals itself to the observer in its external manifestations.

Anthropology does not have exact translations for experiential terms like *marcha* or *ambiente*, terms that are both representational and pragmatic. Native languages are capable of integrating such ambiguities synaesthetically and metaphorically, pointing to the bodily and subjective dimensions of experience and to the socially objectified in a single move. The questions that arise then are: does the analytic jargon of anthropologists grasp what the practice holds of an experience as much as these native symbolic mediations do? How can we reconstruct what the subjects do with what the exterior does to them?

A second ethnographic sketch may give a clearer insight into the problem. Angel counselled as an educational psychologist at a public high school in Madrid. The students' parents were mainly qualified manual workers and white-collar workers. The formal counselling programmes informed about university studies by means of texts, talks, classroom discussions and booklets. But the school experience around these matters was a continuous frustration, because the hopes so fostered met with the resistance of conceptions originated in another field of social practices, that of family relationships, which, without having been formalized in procedures of cultural transmission, displayed greater efficiency than the explicit, programmed efforts of the counsellors. From his double role of psychologist and ethnographer, Angel was able to sense the perplexity which was produced by the breakdown between the optimism of the textual descriptions which codified this information ('a world of paper', as one pupil would say in a discussion group), and the wider reality of the universe of their sociocultural practices. The students at the school had explicit intuition of the rupture between the representations of the world projected by the school and immediate learning from their direct experience.

Psychologist (ethnographer): And what about you? Have you decided which degree you're going to study yet?

First Pupil: I still haven't made up my mind. Because . . . I don't know. I'd like to do journalism or law. I'd like to be a journalist, I'd like to be a lawyer. But you don't know what the courses are going to be like. You don't know what you're going to study. You haven't got a clear idea of what you want to do.

Second Pupil: You just haven't got a clue about the different careers.

First Pupil: That's right. You *see* journalists, you *see* lawyers, and obviously you like 'it. You say 'great', 'wonderful'. It's really attractive because they've already got work and everything. But then you say 'I'm going to read journalism.' What are you going to *do* in the course? You don't know. We don't really know anything about the *content* of the course. You just *know* the future – things about what journalists and lawyers do once they've got work.

Psychologist: Would you have a better idea of things if you were aware of the course content?

First Pupil: The thing is, it's not just the content of the courses. Because you get there and it turns out to be a different *world* than the one you imagined. I know a lot of people who . . . I don't know . . . who started a career eager to study only to find out they didn't like the *rhythm* at the university. Or . . . I don't know . . . the lecturers, their attitude. Well, I don't know . . . It's easy to lose faith.

In the context of the classroom, pupils tried to make sense of their personal situation using categories drawn from their lived reality. While the counselling programmes focused on things like 'contents', 'visions' and 'knowledge', pupils stressed 'actions', 'rhythms' and 'worlds'. By such oppositions the agents in the classroom intended to illuminate the realm of the university, which from the high school they could only contemplate at a distance. But the pupils' problem (and also that of the ethnographer) was the sharp hiatus between the two sets of categories.

Both ethnographic cases illustrate the ambiguities of social experience and the incarnation of objectified processes in it. Seeing how rituals like rock concerts invoke non-explicit meanings and efficient experiences, as well as how the pupils in the school acquire preferences and notions about formal academic contexts,

we learn that in social practice there are meanings which are not definable other than *in* and *by* action itself. Often, the protagonists do not know how to answer the question about what something means, but they are able to point out significant issues in a deictic or presentational way.⁴ From this perspective, the native discourse remains a necessary road of access to the meaning of practice, even if it is hardly ever translatable or transparent. The native conceptual mediations of practices are, irretrievably, instruments of action and understanding, so that categories like 'world', 'rhythm', *marcha* or *ambiente* serve to do the very thing they are attempting to reflect.

Besides, the sketches suggest shortages in the ethnographer's vocabulary in order to speak, by means of a propositional mode of discourse, about the ambiguous, vague and locally embedded conditions of the actors' experience. In the sections below we will discuss these and other problems which social scientists, particularly anthropologists, seem to face as they seek to represent social practice in the sphere offered by their observational language.

PRACTICE, ACTION, LANGUAGE: SETTING THE PROBLEM

Any attempt to situate the concept of social practice should begin by considering the Weberian project of elaborating a comprehensive sociology, that is to say, of penetrating the internal conditions of social action. Under the label 'comprehension', Weber recognized an interpretative limit wherever the researcher was incapable of attributing rationality to the actions. Beyond this limit, the interpretation had to give way to comprehension, as 'the essentially negative form of satisfying our demand for a causal explanation with respect to the "interpretation"' (Weber 1985: 81). Social action theory, from its beginnings, restricted practice to the scope of the rational action by which an agent finds himself involved in a universalizable calculation of motives, means, ends and values (Habermas 1982, 1989a).

This way of understanding practice left out anything that did not fit into the rational characterization of the action. Seen as rational action, practice became above all reason (practical reason, as it has been designated by Marshall Sahlins (1976)). This inspired a somewhat ethnocentric vision: a social world perceived in terms

of the way the formal institutions we live by (and in) recognize themselves. Outside such an epistemological enclosure remained all those facets of action which did not match with narrowly instrumental or utilitarian guidelines (cf. Godelier 1990: 209–39). Practice in general had been instituted as the residues, as the remainder.

For anthropology as an empirical discipline, the penetration of this left-over is, however, crucial, and not simply due to the *horror vacui* which the old holistic aspiration provokes in it. It is also the case because for the ethnographer everyday practices are not merely the object of research, but the primordial means of constructing the object itself (cf. Stocking 1985, López Coira and Díaz de Rada 1990). To put it in Gumperz's words:

No matter what seemingly reasonable, utilitarian justification members might give for their practices, the anthropologist tends to see behavior as having both rational, or goal-oriented, as well as conventionalized, arbitrary, and culture-bound components. It is the clarification of the role of ritualized, routinized, unconscious, and often glossed-over aspects of behavior, of the way they enter into everyday instructional tasks, that best characterizes the anthropologist's contribution to our understanding of human society and the role of language in it.

(1975: xii)

Notwithstanding these salutary purposes, the main obstacle of any ethnographer in actually performing such a programme is to cope with the sharp differences that contrast the real practices which agents carry out in their daily life with the language used by theorists to order, classify, interpret and explain these practices. The 'glossed-over' aspects of behaviour seem to possess a rationale of their own, different from the rationality of action as reflected in the systematic reconstructions of the observer. This gap or *décalage* between two diverging logics has for a long time been a focus of interdisciplinary confluence. Authors as diverse as Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Lave, Michel de Certeau, Mark Johnson, James W. Fernandez or Stanley J. Tambiah have coincided in pointing out the deficiencies and traps of a logistic or intellectualist reduction of social action and experience.⁵ All of them suggest the existence of what could be called a conceptual vacuum inevitably dividing the analytical categories (clad in words) from the practices

analysed (embodied in action, routines, schemata, bodily movements, etc.).

The predominance of textual and representational metaphors of culture and behaviour in sociocultural studies might be seen as an attempt to prevent such a gap. Since Austin it has been common to consider language as action, paying attention to its pragmatic dimensions and to how speakers 'do things with words' (Austin 1971). On the other hand, the interpretative tradition of anthropology is distinguishable for its special sensibility with regard to the meaning which human groups give to their practices. It pays attention to the expressive qualities of action beyond the purposive ends which may guide it.

Nevertheless, this convergence which brings language and action closer together, in conceptual terms does not cease being somewhat asymmetrical. When we examine the background of metaphors and models upon which our understanding of what people say and do rests, we perceive a large imbalance in favour of terminology based on language, text or discourse, as opposed to a relative scarcity of vocabulary to speak directly about practice in its own terms. We have more words to describe other words than to explain what is done with them.

Obviously, what we call metaphors of language, discourse and text are no more than a heterogeneous collection of categorial instruments with very different implications. The emphasis of linguistic relativism in the grammatical structure of languages is far removed from the universalizing interest of French structuralism in the phonological mechanism of binary operations. This in turn differs considerably from the attention given recently to matters such as the pragmatics of language-use, sociolinguistic change, generative language, the construction of discursive coherence, or the dialogic nature of speech. Too often, the structure of language has been taken as a model for all practice. Since language was understood as a body of objectified social conventions, cultural interpretation took the form of a sort of cryptological activity of decoding or deciphering. The prevalence of the external interpreter banished the actual agents. In the face of that, the metaphors of 'dialogue' and of 'translation' drastically reopen the relationships of the theory with its object, cultural diversity. In a concert in which many voices are heard and in which many logics interact, the scientific institution renounces the pretence of being the only form of mediation (Cruces and Díaz de Rada 1991).

Among these different metaphors of practice (and, more fully, of culture) there is a continuity which interests us. They are rough proposals seeking to close the gap between descriptive languages and the actions described, and implying an attempt to conserve their particularity, their wholeness in a local context: that which Fernandez has termed the 'embeddedness' of meaning (Fernandez 1978: 221). In order to recuperate the logics, the voices and the senses which sociological objectivization annuls, textual metaphors suggest an 'as if': read the ritual as if it were a text; analyse the rules of descent as if they obeyed a code or logical schemata; contemplate ways of eating, walking or working as if we were dealing with a grammar.

The use, often implicit, of this type of textual metaphors may represent an important conceptual aid. But its feebleness can be seen in the mysterious, if not paradoxical, appearance which the processes of transmission, incorporation and execution of practices tend to take on when the language of theory is superimposed on them (as happened in the 'mysteries' of our sketches). In Certeau's expression, practical knowledge appears then as a *docte ignorance*: an unconscious wisdom, a knowledge without awareness (1979: 136-41). If there are 'logics', 'voices' or 'forms of knowing' in the practices themselves, the inevitable inertia of the analytic language and the routines of writing which we employ as observers tend to blur their *locus*. We are no longer sure of where to situate them, or to whom we should attribute them. At the start, there are silent practices on the data side, and clear and abstract concepts on the theory side. As the investigation advances (especially as it is being written), there appears an elucidation of meanings which is located somewhere within the space that separates the constructions of the anthropologists and the actions of the agents. It is not simply that theory takes on local contents (e.g. lexical loans of difficult translation, like *mana*, *taboo*, *potlach* or *soul*). In a correlative way, it becomes difficult to discern the degree of psychological reality of these 'forms of knowing' and 'meanings', caught halfway between the tools of the anthropologist and the empirical context.

The distinction competence versus performance will illustrate our point. The Habermasian separation between the reconstructive sciences of competence and the empirical sciences of performance is well known (Habermas 1989b: 313). Such a distinction vanishes from the moment when the model reconstructed by the

researcher from his own knowledge of rule (whether grammatical, pragmatic or logical) has to be postulated as a factor present in the mind of the subjects. Henceforth, the 'reconstructive' discourse becomes 'empirical', a fact evident in the *rapprochement* that Habermas himself has been forced to make with the more empiricist and analytic traditions of social research.

Textual metaphors, together with other heuristic devices, tend to represent human practice in a roundabout way. We wonder if this tendency might not be due to the nature of the ethnographic work in itself. In so far as we, anthropologists, are to interpret practices which others carry out, we are placed at the following crossroads: (1) impose every significance on native practices from the outside (from the system of relationships set up by the language of observation); (2) make the practices speak more than they actually do, in a show of ethnographic ventriloquism. In the former case, native practices, subordinated to a network of causal relationships and statistical distributions, tend to go dumb: justifications, agents and *manières de faire* become blurred (Certeau 1979: 20). In the latter case, their assimilation to language, discourse or text tends to textualize them in excess, superimposing the particular coherence of a written and propositional mode of discourse on the conditions of practice, which are, as we will try to argue, extremely different. It is as if the significance of practices, real and relevant, but barely transparent, had to be reconstructed at the level of theory, whether by means of the dominant categories of the analysis of meaning, or by means of local concepts, lexical borrowings which exercise a similar mediation between behaviour and its sense.

An instance of the first temptation could be to understand the pupil's troubles in our second sketch in terms of 'school failure'. An instance of the second one are the statements by journalists in Madrid newspapers, reading the rock concerts as 'acts of love', 'explosions of energy' or 'forgetfulness of everyday sorrows'.

These common dilemmas of any fieldworker reveal the existence of terminological problems when it comes to speaking of schemata for action and patterns of experience. Sheltering in, or returning to, antimentalist or objectivistic prejudices is not a satisfactory solution. Adopting an objectivistic position prevents the very problem from emerging, because such a perspective disdains from the outset the explanatory relevance of the incarnated senses of native experience. On the contrary, we take their relevance for

granted. The closer our look at such issues, the deeper our understanding of the social process.

This does not mean the encumbering of any mystical subjectivism. It does mean the reassessing of our analytic tools in order to grasp the nuances of human behaviour. What is needed is to specify in which ways the construction of the analytic concepts of the observer differ from the practical knowledge of the agents. In other words, it is necessary to reflect on the nature of our own language of analysis when contrasted with the specific conditions of social practice and experience. This is the purpose of the following section.

FROM THE COHERENCE OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL DISCOURSE TO THE CONDITIONS OF SOCIAL PRACTICE AND EXPERIENCE

If the different conceptual languages of anthropology have any common trait, it is that of discursive coherence: an order of meaning which it is supposed contains, at the very least, the capacity to re-present and evoke a given sociocultural world. Such a representation is supposed to be orientated towards a scientific community, in which a rationalistic scrutiny and discussion demands a certain degree of validity (adequacy and relevance of the representations) and liability (stability of the representational code). The coherence of anthropological discourse establishes itself thanks to the predominant use of an expressive medium (verbal language in writing), in which certain basic properties, for our purposes, stand out (Table 1).

This language allows a propositional expression of knowledge, a shaping of ideas which operates by means of reference to a world represented with claims of truth. The propositional construction of discourse tends to prevail over the non-propositional aspects of language (for example, the intentional and pragmatic components of communication) and over the properties of reality which cannot easily be contained in language itself (Goody 1990). In this way this expressive mode is able to reduce reality to language, and language to a network of propositions.

Given that these properties of the propositional mode are quite unavoidable within the context of the scientific communication, it would be inaccurate to take this reduction as a form of reductionism. We know that sociocultural reality and experience cannot be

Table 1 Anthropological discourse versus social practice and experience

<i>The coherence of anthropological discourse</i>	<i>The conditions of social practice and experience</i>
Propositionality	Total fact Integration Presentational mode Ambivalence Opacity
Discreteness	Temporal and social continuity Rupture of symbolic distinctions
Articulation	Polithetia
Seriality	Substitutability Multimedia Simultaneity
Panopsis	Partiality Opportunism Local character
Reversibility	Privileges temporal relations Enunciative present Irreversibility

identified with propositional language, but we have to express our ideas by means of this mode if we are to construct a rational space of dialogue. Propositional language provides the resources for it, but it sets the limits at the same time. For example, it is able to include rhetorical tropes which can partially reflect the displacements and continuities we operate in our social practice. As anthropologists we are used to making quotations such as *ambiente*, *marcha*, 'world', verbal expressions which our informants mention as a part of their experience. The point is that, in the context of anthropological discourse, these tropes and native terms have to be subordinated to a sense of coherence universally understandable. The propositional language can include these experiential windows only by reducing their divergent 'logic' to the convergent logic of scientific representations. As a consequence, native vocabulary may be elevated to the realm of irreducible or ineffable. As we have shown explicitly, anthropology is forced to appropriate the native terms as encapsulated experience even in

the case of the study of our own societies, when anthropologists are real agents of the sociocultural process they try to depict.

As a written text, anthropological discourse presents itself in a discrete, articulate and sequential medium. Analytic description has to be fragmented and discontinuous, but if it aspires to reach the composition of an order it has to submit itself to a criterion of articulation which confides a necessary meaning to the elements (and also to their possible substitutes) in a logical series.

Finally, the expressive medium makes possible a panoptic vision of represented reality (Certeau 1979: 82–9; Bourdieu 1990: 83). The permanence of the inscriptions gives control over the totality of the expressed knowledge. Written texts provide a simultaneous vision of the before and after. In addition, diagrams and synoptic drawings redirect the attention in all conceptual directions. Consequently, anthropological discourse can give way to an experience of reversibility in the utopic and u-chronic field of textual references: it can retract or justify itself a posteriori, it can bring together that which reality obstinately separates, and it can separate for analysis that which in the world of life is given in compact experiences.

On the other hand, what can we say about the experiences that are brought to life by practice or incarnated in practical and common-sense labels such as *marcha* or 'rhythm'? Essentially, social practice, in Mauss's definition, presents itself to agents as a total fact (1979: 258–63). We are speaking of an immediate, integrated experience in which the exercise of communication is not primarily engaged with an attempt at analytical clarification. Rather, this exercise is penetrated by actions and interpretations of actions which constantly intertwine elements coming from different perspectives, levels and fields of reality. Properties such as ambivalence, ambiguity, contradiction and conflict mark important domains of sociocultural life. Let us look, for example, to the dynamics of domination. It is common to separate the dominants from the dominated by well-defined frontiers. But in these kinds of relationship we have to assume an important degree of ambivalence, since some part of the comprehension of reality sustained by the dominants is integrated in the perspectives of the dominated. And what the dominated take from the dominants cannot be reduced to a mere addition of elements but comprises a relational and transformational sphere of operations (Grignon and Passeron 1982: 49–96). The cognitive, symbolic and ritual realms

share similar properties as well. Their realities have to be grasped by playing with the ambiguities of the displacement and condensation of meaning, processes of inchoation and lightening (Fernandez 1986). In their very constitution, social life and experience owe their structure to a structuration that is continuous, and crossed by contradiction and conflict (Willis 1978; Giddens 1984).

Being made to a certain extent by representations, experience is above all a presentational fact. By contrast to a representational mode, a presentational one operates analogically, in the presence of face-to-face interaction and by means of complex wholes of unbounded information. In a presentational mode, communicated contents and media of communication are intricately linked. Words and other representational tools do things, or are even processed as if they were things. In summary, the agents' knowledge is quite far from the intellectualized imagery of our academic milieu: the body is in the mind (Johnson 1987). As Certeau indicates, everyday practices are opaque, since in their very performance they conceal the meanings which the analyst believes he can see in them. This is not to say that the practical experience is contrary to all kinds of self-reference. Social agents in their everyday life monitor their behaviour at a practical stage. Their knowledge is practical knowledge.

Social practice constitutes the space for all types of social, cultural and temporal continuities. On the one hand, the agents construct and interpret the present contexts in the terms of other ones. In each particular experience, they are loaded with the burden of wider and more comprehensive experience. On the other hand, they bring into play, according to each case, both the long *durées* which penetrate the sense of collective history, and the short time-spans which allow the agents to play with the short distances of face-to-face relationships.

Analytical requirements of modern science seem to fragment social reality into domains: economy, art, kinship, religion. This approach, being necessary for rational understanding, does not fit with the ways in which the agents perceive and create the world, however. A single action can usually be found saturated with meanings which refer to a wide range of fields. For instance, a move in the domain of religion can yield effects in the domain of economy or kinship; and it can even yield unintended effects precisely because the agent is not completely conscious of the whole set of relations and mediations. This constant exercise of

rupture and reconstruction of symbolic distinctions seems to be one of the main traits of everyday practices.

As a consequence, the criteria of practice are not clearly defined guidelines. They are ones which operate according to polythetic and fuzzy classifications,⁶ where the appearance of a given element usually corresponds not to a logical series, but rather to an indeterminate sequence of substitutions. The meaning of the actions and practical representations cannot be reduced, from an informationalist perspective, to plain information (in the narrow technical sense of a reduction of uncertainty), or even to a componential set of attributes semantically elaborated. To a certain extent, the meaning of the 'meaning' has to be assessed in the field, contrasting the common-sense definitions with that of the social sciences.

Social practice brings into play a range of communicative and expressive channels. It is, by definition, a multimedia complex (Tambiah 1985: 145) whose global meaning does not lend itself to a reduction to what happens in each of the media separated from the rest. As the agents never cease to act, these media operate simultaneously. The regulation of the interactions should be thought of as if it were a dance (Gearing 1979).

Practice is partial and opportunist. Everyday interests play not in absent arenas, but in concrete and proximate relations of force. Agents may try to satisfy their most immediate interests, against the satisfaction of other ones attributed to them from a panoptic, rational and scientific perspective. Besides, practice is local in space and in time. Its temporality (like that of enunciation) is projected from the present and in the present. Although there might be evocation, there can be no turning back; although there might be anticipation, there is no prediction. Each moment of the action establishes itself in a specific *locus* from which it is not possible to sight the full group of relationships. For this reason, reversibility is unlikely in practical experience. By contrast to the panopsis which is brought about by written conceptual language, practice seems blind and fateful.

SOME NOTES ON REFLEXIVITY

It could be said that our ethnographic argument and that of Tamara Kohn (in this volume) follow opposite roads, although not necessarily opposed ones. Instead of the external view of a stranger entering a radically alien culture without a full mastery of

its language, our ethnographic sketches are based on a previous linguistic understanding of the contexts studied. While Kohn's paper tends to find mutualities between the ethnographer's and the native's direct experience of the culture, we have, conversely, underlined the ruptures and breakdowns among a diversity of levels of comprehension inside a single culture.

What we have attempted here is to call for a notion of reflexivity removed from the intellectualistic and logocentric assumptions of Western thought. By 'reflexivity' we mean a basic and general human capacity for self-reference that takes both representational and operational forms. We do lack a positive, crystal-clear definition of what a 'practical reflexivity' is all about. But, as a matter of fact, the chief challenge for understanding practice is to account for those reflexive conditions of human action that are not properly contained in the models of language, text and discourse.

The problem of reflexivity so understood cross-cuts common oppositions like linguistic experience/prelinguistic experience, on the one hand, and others' ethnography/home ethnography, on the other. It implies that (1) practical experience cannot easily be labelled as 'extra' or 'prelinguistic' (or, consequently as 'merely linguistic' either). In other words, practical realities are 'linguistic' and 'extralinguistic' at the same time: words are just one of the sources by which cultural agents reflect upon themselves. Self-reference and self-mention are obviously significant skills, although not necessarily restricted to explicit verbal behaviour. (2) The coherence of anthropological discourse is just one mode of reflexivity. Anthropology does not have the sole right of it; as a matter of fact, the ethnographies show, although in a partial way, the many faces of native reflexivity. Human beings are able to take themselves as objects of reflection in ritual performance, in everyday routines, in marked speech, in political action, in the process of institutionalization, and wherever they create and recreate culture by means of practising it.

In our view, the existence of the aforementioned gap or *décalage* which divides the analytical categories from the ones embedded in social practice and experience is quite indifferent to oppositions such as prelinguistic-linguistic, others-us. On the basis of the first, Kohn compares her experience with that of young brides coming from outside the communities she studied. On the basis of the second, Peter Hervik elaborates on the concept of reflexivity in fieldwork as cross-cultural space. Our hypothesis is that, in any

case, the vacuum we have been trying to describe will always appear in the ethnographic process, even once the ethnographer has acquired the cultural and linguistic competence which can be considered as adequate in methodological terms, and whether he/she is a member of that culture or not.

Of course, our characteristic position as observers may affect this vision. As has been stated above, for us there was no prelinguistic shock at all; at least, not in the extreme way it could happen to a naive alien ethnographer. Before entering the field, we had experiences at parties, concerts and schools. As native ethnographers, we both had to cope with the paradoxical task of translating the experiential categories of our social world into anthropological ones (rather than doing it the other way round). But this common trait should not conceal the fact that, in a complex, urban, plural society, the range of virtual positions for an observer is wide and manifold. Working as a technical consultant in a formal institution differs greatly from entering the arena of a rock concert as an anonymous voyeur. Only the fiction of being 'natives' of such contexts could lead one to neglect these differences.

Our topic of discussion can then be restated as the existence of a diversity of modes of reflexivity that are not correctly settled when the problem is reduced to a contrast in terms of 'they' (the natives) versus 'we' (the members of the ethnographer's culture of origin). For, whether 'native' or 'foreigner', 'local' or 'alien', the anthropologist is always an intruder. It is for this reason that we have focused on the analytic tools of anthropological discourse, and not on the ethnographer's particular cultural background. The fiction can no longer be maintained that the anthropologist belongs to a single, unique culture. As a matter of fact, nobody does; everyone is, to a certain degree, native of a diversity of levels of inclusion within sociocultural borders. Very often, when anthropologists speak in terms of the they-we opposition it is no more than a rhetorical device, useful for expositional purposes, but misleading to the extent that it reproduces an insular conception of cultures. Identities are not only multilevelled, but mobile: what the ethnographer gathers always depends on his/her own relational definition with respect to others. It is, say, like a snapshot of a crowd in movement. Our urban fieldwork 'at home' leads us to a sensitive recognition of these facts. Often our informants were as permeable to a universalist and rationalist motto as we were, and we had to negotiate our views with them on an equal basis.

In order to account for the complexity of this issue, it should not be enough, therefore, to trace a crude line between the coherence of anthropological discourse and the conditions of social practice and experience. The anthropological discourse is also due to a process of practical experience. Conversely, non-anthropologists seek for coherent interpretations of the world they live in. This is specially true when they are demanded to elaborate rational reconstructions about their own culture, as is the case in the ethnographic interview. It would have been necessary to carry out, so to speak, a fourfold comparison, contrasting the observer's theoretical discourse (a) with research as a specific form of practice and experience, (b) with the conditions of the observed practices, and (c) with the construction of discursive coherence created by the informants.

In highlighting the problem of a conceptual vacuum in the analytic language of practice, it has not been our intention to criticize the worth of the irreplaceable heuristics based as much on a social action theory as on textual metaphors. Rather, we have explored some of the conditions of any analytic effort in relation to the social world. The research activity generates effects over the object of study. Often, ethnography as a product overshadows ethnography as a process; a process which is rooted in the quick-sands of non-transparent experiences and loose, fuzzy and sketchy domains of social practice. Every research has its mysteries of incarnation. In this respect, we anthropologists are not any different from those around us.

NOTES

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- 2 Synaesthesia is a rhetorical trope which expresses properties that belong to a sensorial modality as if they belonged to another, i.e. 'a sweet melody', 'a hot rhythm'.
- 3 The evolutionist theories of religion defined 'ritual' as a medium of communication with the supernatural world. Further developments of the concept have enlarged their field of application, taking it as a category of action in its own right rather than as the result of a body of religious beliefs (Velasco 1986: 65-75). 'Social plus' refers to the expressive quality of ritual acts that lies beyond any means-to-ends explicit calculation. For an elaboration of this concept, see García, Velasco *et al.* 1991: 264-5.

- 4 The distinction 'presentational' versus 'representational' will be discussed below. On presentational, participatory and iconic coding, see Tambiah 1990: 84–110.
- 5 A diversity of critical labels reminds us just how lacking our attempts usually are and what the dangers of confusing both levels of reality could be: 'philologism' (Bajtin, quoted in Bourdieu 1988: 116), 'objectivism', 'theoricism', 'logicism' (Bourdieu 1988: 119; 1990: 25–41), 'intellectualism' (Evans-Pritchard 1989: 41; Fernandez 1978: 220–5); 'psychologism', 'formalism' (Polanyi 1976: 155–78), 'utilitarianism' (Sahlins 1988: 162–5), 'rationalism' (Lave 1989: 172–6; Tambiah 1990). All of these concepts, although often linked to an explicit critique of Enlightenment and modern suppositions of social action theory, generally point to a breakdown of greater importance which affects sociocultural research as a whole.
- 6 While in monothetic classification the criteria are always hierarchical and independent, polythetic classification melts heterogeneous levels of hierarchy within non-independent sets of categories.

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