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What is This?
Towards Unity in Diversity in World Anthropology

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‘Other anthropologies and anthropology otherwise’ brings together the larger part of the ideas being developed and disseminated in the ‘World Anthropologies Network (WAN)’¹ project set up and coordinated by Arturo Escobar and Gustavo Lins Ribeiro. As Restrepo and Escobar indicate, their article is an attempt – along similar lines to those who speak in terms of ‘native anthropologies’, ‘anthropologies of the South’, ‘peripheral anthropologies’ or ‘anthropologies with an accent’ – to recognize anthropological science as being profoundly marked by the same essential characteristic that an anthropological perspective ascribes to sociocultural reality as a whole. What is proposed, then, is the rebuilding of our science in such a way as to make this characteristic more visible by conceiving of and practicing anthropology as ‘unity in diversity’.

Clearly, the concept of a ‘science’ in such a project denotes an object of study distinct from that of neopositivism, critical rationalism or logical constructivism. Rather, with or without explicit reference to Kuhn, scientific discourse here is understood to be part of a wider cultural process. As such, it is inextricably bound to those social actors who create it, validate it, spread and reproduce its ideas – the so-called scientific communities. These, in turn, inevitably bear the stamp of their specific socio-historical circumstances.²

Since the end of the Second World War, and more particularly since the end of the subsequent phase of decolonization, the number and visibility of ‘Other Anthropologies’ has been slowly growing. These anthropologies are the result of the spread of ideas from those European and North American centers where anthropology first was invented and consolidated as a scientific discipline. However, it is not a question of simple ‘replicas’ or ‘echoes’ (even if that is how they started out, and despite the persistence at their core of segments of the original, even in dominant and/or hegemonic form) but of anthropologies in their own right, rooted in and built up through specific social, cultural, scientific, academic and professional circumstances. But awareness of the existence of these Other Anthropologies is scarce both in those original centers and in the countries for so long seen from that distant perspective as no more than places to study. In fact, it would be possible to speak in terms of a definite strategy...
to make these Other Anthropologies invisible, and Restrepo and Escobar’s

text mentions various of the mechanisms through which this has been
done. In consequence, among the international anthropological

community there is very limited understanding that it is facing a major

scientific challenge in the form of the emergence of these Other Anthro-

pologies and the wide-scale reconfiguration of anthropology in general that

they imply.

The aim of the following brief observations is to draw attention to,
clarify and, in some cases advance the critical discussion of, some of the key
aspects of the ideas that Restrepo and Escobar offer in their article, ideas
with which this commentator concurs, from a point of view that has always
 tried to include all types of Anthropologies of the South but nevertheless
has as its main perspective Latin America and the Caribbean.

I.M. Lewis’ remark that ‘ethnocentricity is the natural condition of
mankind’ (Lewis, 1976: 13) takes on particular significance when we take
into account the fact that alterity is the founding category both of ‘the
anthropological question’ and of the science of anthropology itself since its
invention in the 19th century (Krotz, 1994). Alterity points straight to the
basic epistemological problem for anthropology. We are taken back,
indeed, to the emblematic experience of the traveler, which highlights the
dialectical relationship between one’s own experiential space and that of
the other. When the traveler encounters another society, subculture or
regional culture, etc., what mainly strikes him/her is what is different from
an everyday experience whose ‘naturalness’ is normally taken for granted;
when he/she returns, the differences noted in the other society become
important reference points for the analysis and even critique of his/her
own society.

So, the increasingly frequent, intense and visible manifestations of
Other Anthropologies, each different within themselves and different from
dominant anthropologies, poses an interesting question. How is a scientific
discipline which was originally designed as a cognitive instrument for the
understanding of ‘others’ (who, in the case of living societies, were always
others with no chance of answering back) now transforming itself as a
project in the degree to which groups within societies that are the
traditional object of anthropological study start to use this cognitive instru-
ment in order to gain anthropological knowledge both of their own socio-
cultural reality (in the immediate sense) and of global sociocultural reality
as seen from their specific, local perspective? What are the distinctive
characteristics of these Other Anthropologies when compared to the origi-

nals? How do their emergence and presence modify the whole of anthro-
pology, that is, world anthropology? What would have to change within
both dominant and emergent anthropologies to allow us to exploit better
than we are currently doing their cognitive potential as single yet plural.
How can we speed the renewal of a discipline distanced once and for all
from monocentrism and unitarism?
It seems that neither sociology, nor political science, nor social psychology ask themselves such questions, or if they do, that they do so in other terms. A deepening of these epistemological questions, then, would also benefit the whole range of social sciences, which should not be seen as a homogeneous hybrid but rather as the dynamic accumulation of disciplines whose approaches to an ever-changing socio-cultural reality is what both distinguishes them from each other and brings them together.

Given that, like the other efforts mentioned above, what Restrepo and Escobar’s text is trying to do is only a start, it is not surprising that parts of it show signs of tentativeness in conceptualization and of its still weighing up its various components. This is particularly the case where the relative importance assigned to geographical/territorial issues is concerned. One moment where this tentativeness becomes apparent is where there is a reluctance to privilege geographical location among other possible criteria; however, the text makes abundant use of spatial metaphors and speaks not only of regions but of frontiers, margins and crossings.

This aspect needs careful attention, and not only because a good deal of the apologia for the current phase of globalization tends to use so-called ‘deterritorialization’ as demonstrative of an equally taken-for-granted worldwide economic, political and cultural multipolarity. It is also noteworthy that the names Native Anthropologies, peripheral Anthropologies and Anthropologies of the South emphasize the spatial dimension, although without reducing this to simple geography or postulating some homogeneous and closed and bounded space of sociocultural reality. But the fact is that North Atlantic civilization, where urban-industrial modernity and the scientific revolution first were formed, was a clearly delimited sociocultural space from which a global colonial system was elaborated and controlled, and in which the terms ‘South’ and ‘Orient’ became terms for the identification of distinct types of society that could be distant or close by ‘others within’ modernizing societies themselves. The societies thus distinguished, for their part, did not find themselves positioned simply as neighbors but rather, as the expressions ‘Anthropologies of the South’ and ‘peripheral Anthropologies’ attempt to connote, as the opposite poles in a single system of power. A global geography of hunger, exploitation, and exclusion established throughout the 19th century can still be easily identified today, despite the fact that frontiers have become more permeable than before and that in both regions, the North and the South, there are currently enclaves where the North lives within the South and the South within the North. In as much as this situation forms part of the conditions of production of anthropology as a science, it merits a prominent position in the analysis of the different segments that today make up world anthropology.

It is highly significant that the perspective built up by the World Anthropologies project and developed in Restrepo and Escobar’s text is not limited to those anthropologies that have emerged in areas long subject to...
colonialism from the main European and North American powers. Instead, they include cases of Other Anthropologies developed in countries where such colonialism had a lesser effect than in most other parts of the world (for example, Japan) and in ‘peripheral’ colonial powers (such as the Scandinavian countries). There is a similar situation in regard to Other Anthropologies that might emerge from within those countries where anthropology had its origins and where those creating and practicing these Other Anthropologies come, or could come, from population groups made subordinate through colonial and neocolonial processes (such as Chicana anthropology in the USA, Catalan anthropology in Spain, or Turkish anthropology in Germany).

This situation, be it real or prospective, directs our attention to a similar situation in a number of Latin American countries. When, a quarter of a century ago, a well-known Mexican anthropologist published an important collection of texts called ‘On Contemporary Mexican Indian Political Thought’ (Bonfil, 1981), many thought his assessment of the situation exaggerated. Today there are many known cases of anthropologists from indigenous communities who understand themselves to be precisely that and who not only question anthropological knowledge produced by the non-indigenous about their own societies and the national societies of which these form a part, but who are themselves beginning to produce anthropological knowledge about those societies. This is a situation that will doubtless produce other Anthropologies of the South beyond those already existing in Latin America and different from those emerging in parts of Africa, Asia and Oceania.

To conclude, we can signal that further critical development of the metatheoretical perspectives represented in Restrepo and Escobar’s text, and in those cited by them as convergent with or similar to their ideas, is indeed one of the great projects of the moment. But their perspectives also need the backing of wide-reaching research to develop a historical and systematic analysis of those different anthropological traditions that remain still almost invisible to us. Anthropology as a science has at its disposal theoretical and methodological elements sufficient to this task and which would allow it to contribute to the anthropology of anthropology on a global scale.7

Notes

1. See http://www.ram-wan.org
2. For a model of scientific method, see Krotz (1987).
3. It is scarcely necessary to demonstrate here its absence or marked marginalization in the ‘North’. It is interesting that there should be a similar situation in the South since – as for example in the case of Mexico – the theme is at times given high profile (see, for example, the 2004 study by A. Medina on Mexican anthropology as an ‘anthropology of the south’), while at other times it remains
completely absent (for example, in the three introductory texts to a recent anthology on contemporary Mexican anthropology by De la Peña and Vázquez, 2002).


5. On this, see the critical observations by Daniel Mato (2004: 70–1).

6. It is worth recalling here how E.B. Tylor, in his famous text on the concept of culture, compared the European peasant of his day with the inhabitants of Central Africa (Tylor, 1975: 33). Regarding the ‘other within’, see Cardoso de Oliveira (2004: 38–41).

7. A start has already been made. In nearly all Latin American countries important, if intermittent and not very systematic, research has been carried out for some time on the anthropological tradition within those countries; and calls for such research are becoming more and more urgent (see Bolaños, 2001: 43). In June 2005 the Red Mexicana de Instituciones de Formación de Antropólogos (RedMIFA) (Mexican Network of Anthropological Training Institutes) approved a large inter-institutional project on the anthropology of Mexican anthropology (see first stage proposal at: http://www.uam-antropologia.info/anteproyecto_redmifa_2005.pdf).

**References**


