ON THE STRANGE AND THE FAMILIAR IN RECENT ANTHROPOLOGICAL THOUGHT

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Because a scholarly essay does not, like Athena, spring full-grown from the brow of its genitor—even though its birth, like Athena’s, may have been precipitated by a prolonged headache—it is perhaps desirable to indicate the genesis of this essay. The germ was implanted in my brow many years ago by T. S. Eliot, but it was born only recently following a short but concentrated immersion in some current anthropological and philosophical writings preparatory to writing a paper on contemporary cultural relativism, and than capped by a passage in a recent essay by Renato Rosaldo. But first to T. S. Eliot.

In his essay on Andrew Marvell, Eliot writes that in Marvell’s verse there is “the making the familiar strange, and the strange familiar,” a characteristic that, Eliot adds (attributing this notion to Coleridge), is the hallmark of all “good” poetry. When I first read that essay, it struck me, in that “shock of recognition” that Edmund Wilson describes so well, that Eliot’s characterization of “good” poetry aptly characterizes “good” anthropology as well. The ability of the anthropologist to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar may not equal that of the poet, but that that is what he does seemed to me at that time to be self-evident.

Convinced as I was of the aptness of that comparison and more than a little pleased that it was inspired by my favorite contemporary poet, that idea nevertheless remained dormant until my exposure, many years later, to the anthropological writings I mentioned above. For after encountering the n-th time (n, in this case, being a very large number) one of the critical terms of that work, namely, “the Other,” that line of Eliot’s suddenly obtruded on my consciousness. And this time, just like the first time, I had one of those “Aha!” experiences that we all know so well.

What struck me this time, however, was the very opposite of what had struck me the first time. For while Eliot’s characterization of the poet is applicable to contemporary poets, no less than to their predecessors, my extrapolation of that characterization to the anthropologist, although applicable to the anthropologists of that earlier period, does not, however, apply to a significant percentage of their successors. Many of them, together with many other social scientists, reject explicitly and on principle the making of the familiar strange, and the strange familiar. In them, it struck me, anthropology had undergone a sea change, one that occurred, roughly, some two decades ago.

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Before describing this sea change, it is perhaps useful to explain why it was that I originally believed that Eliot’s characterization of the good poet also characterized the good anthropologist—in his three roles of teacher, scholar, and cultural critic. Let us begin with the role of teacher.

Consider, in that regard, an introductory course in anthropology. By observing, for example, that most human societies are unilineal, such a course encourages undergraduates to view the familiar—the bilateral descent system of their own society—as strange, “strange” in the sense of being deviant from a comparative, or statistical, human norm. Conversely, by locating the veneration of saints in a cross-cultural, rather than merely a Catholic perspective, that same course encourages those same students to view polytheism as familiar, “familiar” in that it enables them to comprehend a strange religious system by reference to an analogous one that is found in their own culture.

Notice, moreover, that by this device of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, teacher and student alike come to view the familiar with a greater degree of objectivity than would otherwise be the case. For if, in respect to one or another cultural system or social institution, the first operation makes their own group different from other groups, while the second makes it similar to them, then the familiar can be seen as both more and as less strange than it had previously been assumed to be.

But the dual operation of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar has been employed by anthropologists not only as a pedagogical device but also as a scientific method. In the first place, because it makes cross-cultural comparison and classification possible, that dual operation has been used as an indispensable first step in the attempt to discover social and cultural generalizations. It does that through translation.

By “translation” I do not mean the rendering of the cultural systems and social institutions of strange groups by the concepts of one’s own group: That might make the strange familiar, but it does not make the familiar strange. Rather, I mean rendering of both, the strange and the familiar alike, by a third set of concepts—that is, anthropological concepts—which, being familiar to neither and strange to both, permits the anthropologist to compare the strange and familiar in accordance with one and the same classificatory system.
For the anthropologist, that procedure makes the strange familiar because the scientific concepts by which he classifies strange cultures are familiar to him, qua scholar; and it makes the familiar strange because the latter concepts, in principle at least, exclude the connotative meanings and affective resonances of the anthropologist’s own culture, which for him, qua native, are its important distinguishing features.

The operation of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar has been employed as a method not only for cross-cultural generalizations but also for single-culture explanations. For it compels the anthropologist to include in his explanatory net a variety of variables that, because that culture—depending on whether the anthropologist is a native or a foreigner—is either too familiar or too strange, would otherwise remain opaque to his perceptions. In sum, because the strange and the familiar alike foster intellectual distortion, if not blindness, those dual operations are a necessary first step—or so it was formerly believed—for social and cultural explanation.

To put it differently, if philosophers, as Thomas Nagel has recently put it, are driven to adopt “the view from nowhere” without, however, being able to relinquish “the view from here,” then anthropologists have believed that they could overcome that quandary by adopting (what might be called) “the view from everywhere,” a view that encompasses the entire human experience on this planet, from the earliest hominids to our own time and from Zuni to Zaire.

Anthropologists, it may now be observed, have been concerned not only with teaching and scholarship but also (and as a consequence of the latter role) with cultural criticism—the third in their trinity of roles. One has only to mention Boas and Benedict, or Herskovits and Mead, to recognize that from its very inception the combating of Western racism and ethnocentrism, to take only two examples, has been an important objective of American (but not only American) anthropology. And in the service of that objective, its most important strategy has consisted of making the strange familiar—a strategy that has been deployed to combat the alleged moral inferiority of other peoples and cultures, on the one hand, and their alleged cognitive inferiority, on the other.

In respect to the former allegation, that strategy has been deployed to demonstrate that those characteristics of primitive
societies that, by the criteria of Western culture, are morally objectionable, have their analogues in Western society. Thus, although they might practice headhunting, we—so the argument goes—kill many more people in war or permit them to starve to death in the midst of economic plenty.

This, of course, is the *tu quoque* argument, for by arguments of that kind, primitive societies are not so “primitive” after all; or if they are, then our own, familiar society can be considered just as, if not more, “primitive.” Moreover, if these strange cultures are the moral equals of our own, then correlatively their creators (generally, peoples of races other than our own) are not biologically inferior to ourselves (people, mainly, of the white race), not at any rate in respect to their moral values.

In respect, now, to the alleged cognitive inferiority of primitive cultures, the strategy of making the strange familiar has been deployed in a somewhat different way. Rather than arguing that primitive and Western cultures have uniformly attained a similar level of intellectual achievement, it has been argued that although in certain domains—technology, for example—Western culture may be more complex than primitive cultures, in other domains—kinship, for example—it is often the other way around. That being the case, neither the cultures of primitive peoples nor the people themselves are cognitively inferior to our own.

This argument, too, is a species of the *tu quoque* argument because the criterion used to assess mental achievement—intellectual complexity—is again Western. Thus, a much-favored argument in support of the thesis that peoples with technologically simple cultures are capable of complex cognitive functioning is that the eight-class kinship system of the Australian aborigines is so complex that it took some three generations of anthropologists to understand its underlying principles.

Thus far I have attempted to explain why it is that when I first read Eliot I believed that the “good” anthropologist, like the “good” poet, makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Lest, however, I be misunderstood, I should stress that in describing *what* anthropologists attempt to achieve, I do not mean to suggest that I believe (either now or in retrospect) that the *means* they have employed for their achievement have been always valid or successful. Indeed, it is my belief that in many cases they have been neither the one nor the other. Nevertheless, it is because the
attempt to achieve those ends was one of the distinctive characteristics of anthropology that, as a graduate student, I myself chose to study anthropology rather than any of the other social sciences.

I now wish to turn to my second thesis—that for a decade or so many anthropologists (together with many other social scientists) have undergone a sea change in respect to those two operations. In addressing that thesis I must begin, however, by immediately qualifying it: The sea change has occurred primarily in anthropologists’ role as scholars. As teachers, as far as I can tell, we retain both operations as our standard stock-in-trade, and as cultural critics it is my impression that we practice one of those operations—the making of the familiar strange—even more rigorously than previously.

In short, although in their roles as teacher and cultural critic, both operations are alive and well for most anthropologists, in their role as scholars one of these operations—the making of the strange familiar—is virtually dead for more than a few; dead, however, not from benign neglect but from a principled rejection. And in that regard, as I mentioned previously, anthropologists stand shoulder to shoulder with many other social scientists. (In what follows “anthropologists” may be taken as a synecdoche for social scientists in general.)

One group of anthropologists rejects the making of the strange familiar on the ground that the range of cultural diversity makes this operation impossible to achieve; a second group rejects it on the ground that, even if it were possible, Western “domination” of non-Western societies makes it undesirable to achieve. Although somewhat different, these grounds nevertheless overlap (which is why, I may now add, there is still a third group—there is always a third group—who reject that operation on both grounds.)

The overlap between these groups can be expressed in the proposition that the non-Western peoples who comprise the “object” for the Western “subject” (to employ the currently fashionable terms) are “strange”—that is, they are different from ourselves—not in some simple sense but in a fundamental and irreducible sense. In brief, the non-Western object is the “Other.” (I have thus finally returned to my second “Aha!” experience.)

For the first group, the irreducible strangeness of the “Other” is a function, as I said, of the extraordinary degree of diversity among the cultures of the world, as well as the social and psycho-
logical diversity of the peoples and societies that, purportedly, are molded and shaped by those cultures.

“But,” it might now be objected, “what else is new?” That cultures are different, one from another—although the stimulus for anthropological inquiry—was hardly the discovery of anthropologists. That discovery, surely, was made some few millennia ago by the Hellenes, the Hebrews, and the Han. Moreover, having discovered that cultures are different one from another, all three—the “three H’s,” as we shall call them—agreed that insofar as other cultures differed from their own, they were strange, so strange that each of the three H’s viewed itself as civilized and other peoples as barbarians. I shall shortly return to that comparative judgment, for it is crucial to my unfolding story.

Although the three H’s, admittedly, recognized cultural diversity long before it was ever commented upon by anthropologists, there is something new (to return to my rhetorical question) in the view of those anthropologists with whom we are concerned here. What is new is their conception of the magnitude of that diversity. For in their view, cultures not only differ from each other, but each is unique—not in the trivial sense that every snowflake, for example, is unique, but in the radical sense that each is incommensurable.

That claim—that cultures share few, if any, nontrivial similarities—is related of course to the translation problem mentioned previously. For if every human group inhabits its own culturally constituted conceptual world and if the concepts of any one are incommensurate with those of any other, then there is no way by which the members of one group can translate the cultural concepts of any other group—none, at any rate, that is at once both meaningful and intelligible.

But if the members of any group G cannot meaningfully and intelligibly translate the cultural concepts of any other group into their concepts, then for G, other groups are not only strange; they are fundamentally and irreducibly strange. In short, for G, any other group is, like the deus absconditus of Calvinism, wholly “Other”—unknown, because unknowable.

Now, such a radical conception of cultural diversity (as its proponents correctly observe) poses an equally radical challenge to the traditional conception of anthropological scholarship described earlier. For if cultures are comprehensible only in their own terms, then it is clearly not possible for a comparative
anthropology to achieve its twin desiderata of translating the different cultural worlds comprising human cultural diversity in a manner that at one and the same time makes each of them both meaningful and intelligible, on the one hand, and yet comparable with all the others, on the other hand.

The first desideratum, clearly, cannot be achieved by any natural language; even traditional anthropologists agree with that proposition. More important, it cannot be achieved, as was formerly believed, by the technical language of anthropology because, as the creature of Western culture, anthropology is not the transcultural science that it was formerly conceived to be; rather, it is more accurately conceived as an ethnoscientific Western culture, reflecting and being informed by the Western conceptual world. In sum, contrary to the conception of traditional anthropological scholarship, according to this new conception there is no way, even in principle, to break the culture barrier.

But if now the first desideratum of traditional anthropological scholarship is in principle impossible to achieve, then so also (according to the new anthropological conception) is the second, that is, cultural comparison. For in the absence of a language that might in principle render the variety of human cultures in a manner that is at once both meaningful and intelligible, there is then no way by which cultures might possibly be classified and compared—none, at any rate, that is at once both accurate and sensible.

Those twin claims bring me back to my point of departure. For if cultures are as radically dissimilar as has been described, then (as the proponents of this view properly argue) the dissimilarity between the culture of the Western scholar, on the one hand, and any non-Western culture that he might choose to study, on the other, is just as radical. Hence, inasmuch as the familiar culture and the strange share few, if any, nontrivial characteristics, it is impossible in principle for Western scholarship to make the strange familiar. In short, for the Western scholar, the strange cannot possibly be anything other than “Other.”

Let us now turn to the group of anthropologists who reject the making of the strange familiar on the second ground, that such an operation is undesirable to achieve. For this group, the non-Western “object” is “Other,” in the first instance, not so much because cultures are incommensurable (which they are) but because the West—in the service of colonialism, imperialism,
and, more recently, the modern world system—has defined non-Western peoples as “Other.” That construction, inasmuch as it makes non-Western peoples fundamentally inferior, was motivated, so it is claimed, by the need of the West to justify its political and economic domination over non-Western peoples.

According to this view, traditional anthropological scholarship has contributed to that construction by its procedure of making the strange familiar. In brief, when anthropologists attempt to make Third World cultures familiar—by translating them into anthropological concepts and then explaining them by means of anthropological theory—they only succeed (however good their intentions) in making those cultures even more strange. That is because, relative to the Western values that inform the concepts and theories of anthropology—a Western ethnoscience—Third World cultures are willy-nilly inferior.

That, now, Third World peoples have been subjected to the procrustean conceptual bed of anthropological theory is, according to this view, as much an instance of their cultural domination by the West as their economic subjugation by Western imperialists is an instance of Western political domination. In short, the cultural subjugation of Third World peoples, just like their political subjugation, reflects the asymmetrical power relationship between these two peoples.

The only solution to the cultural subjugation of Third World peoples by Western anthropology, so it is claimed, is to create a non-Western anthropology, one that is informed not by Western values but by the radically different values of Third World cultures. When these cultures are conceptualized by the alternative—their own—ethnoscience, they still, of course, remain “Other” vis-à-vis Western culture, but they achieve a status (at the very least) of equality with it. In sum, the strange can only become the equal of the familiar not, paradoxically enough, by being made familiar but by remaining strange.

I have not yet encompassed the full breadth of the sea change that has occurred over the past decade or so in the thought of an influential group of contemporary anthropologists, together with other social scientists and some few philosophers and literary scholars. The magnitude of that change is best captured, I believe, by Renato Rosaldo, who characterized their view (in a passage I alluded to at the beginning of this chapter) as follows: "My own group aside, everything human is alien to me."
I would now suggest that this view constitutes a change in the history not only of anthropological thought but also of human thought, at least of recorded human thought. For consider: when those three great ethnocentrists—the Hellenes, the Hebrews, and the Han—proclaimed the familiar civilized and the strange barbaric, such a comparative judgment rested on the belief that in principle the strange and the familiar could be compared. Without such a belief, that invidious judgment (or, for that matter, any other) could not have been made.

In sum, although for the three H’s other people and cultures were strange, they were not all that strange, that is, not incommensurably strange. That is why a Hellene could proclaim (in a mot that, I presume, is the one that inspired Rosaldo’s) that he was part of all that he met. And it is also why a Roman could say (Rome, after all, is not that far from Greece) that, being human himself, nothing human was alien to him. For both statements entail the claim—that, at any rate, is how I read them—that although the familiar and the strange are different, they are also similar in some nontrivial respects.

These two Mediterranean worthies do not, of course, go nearly as far as the great Vedic sage who, in one of the ringing exclamations of classical Indian religion—\textit{tat tvam asi}, Thou art That—proclaimed that man is similar to the godhead itself. In short, for the Vedic sage, even divinity is not all that strange. But then in such matters, as in so many others, India of course is always the extreme, while the Greeks (and to a lesser extent the Romans) preached, if they did not always practice, moderation.

Thus far my sketch of the sea change that has occurred in recent anthropological thought in respect to the relationship between the familiar and the strange has been confined to the anthropologist as scholar. In order to grasp the full magnitude of that change, however, we must turn now to the anthropologist as cultural critic. In doing so—in turning, that is, from the scholarly treatment of the strange to the critical treatment of the familiar—we shall find (to prefigure my conclusion) that the assertion of Rosaldo is only half right.

Earlier, I described one type of cultural criticism whose aim is to combat Western ethnocentrism and racism. It attempts to achieve this aim, it will be recalled, by showing that although in respect to certain domains primitive and other Third World cultures may be judged inferior to Western culture, both morally
and cognitively, in respect to other domains they are its superior and that on balance the two are more or less equal.

In addition, however, to this type of cultural criticism, there is a second type, which is best characterized as inverted ethnocentrism. Practiced not only by anthropologists but also by other social scientists as well as by literary scholars, this type of criticism argues that Western culture is inferior to Third World cultures not only in respect to certain domains but globally. This type, it might be observed, is almost as old as the first—indeed, frequently, both types have been practiced by one and the same critic—and it has had some distinguished practitioners.

Consider, for example, the following passage from an anthropologist whose intellectual and emotional roots antedate both the countercultural and neo-Marxist ideologies of the 1960s (the inspiration for many contemporary critics of this type), one moreover who is arguably the most distinguished anthropologist of our time. Writing in 1955, Claude Lévi-Strauss observed that anthropology is a Western creation because the West was so tormented by remorse that it had to compare its own image with that of other societies, in the hope that they would either display the same shortcomings or help the West to explain how these defects could have come into being.... The general average of which I spoke earlier throws into relief the existence of a few sociological ogres, among whom we ourselves must be numbered. Nor is this an accident: if it were not that we deserved, and for that matter still deserve, first prize in this grim competition, anthropology would not have come into being; we would have felt no need of it.... [To be sure,] other societies have shared in the same original sin, though they are doubtless few in number, and fewer still as we ascend the ladder of progress.  

Although, as this quotation indicates, the inverted ethnocentrism that characterizes the second type of cultural criticism pre-dates the period of the sea change, still it is my impression (as I suggested earlier) that with the coming of neo-Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, and some few others (mostly of Parisian origin), its scope has become more sweeping and its voice less modulated than formerly. Indeed, I sometimes have the impression that some of these critics may perhaps be committing the error of
which Socrates was (falsely) accused by the Athenians, making the better seem the worse and the worse the better.

Be that as it may, my concern with this type of criticism is not with how well or how responsibly it is conducted but with its relationship to my central topic—the making of the familiar strange and the strange familiar. In that regard, it differs from the first type not only in its global judgment of the inferiority of the familiar but also in the manner by which it reaches that judgment.

While the first type of criticism attempts to achieve its aim by arguing that the familiar is similar (both morally and cognitively) to the strange, this type attempts to achieve its aim by arguing that the familiar, itself, is strange (both morally and emotionally) for its own actors. In that regard, modern Western culture, it is argued, is different from Third World cultures—if not the actual cultures of contemporary primitive and other Third World societies, then the hypothetical cultures of societies of a putatively earlier stage of social evolution.

The latter proviso is important, for insofar as contemporary primitive and other Third World societies have been corrupted as a consequence (so it is argued) of Western influence, their actors are no different from Western actors. As Stephen Tyler has recently put it, “The savage of the twentieth century is sick too; neutered, like the rest of us, by the dark forces of the ‘world system.’”

Cultural criticism of this (the second) type derives its inspiration, as is well known, from one or the other—sometimes both—of two Western intellectual traditions: from Primitivism and Utopianism, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, from any number of theories that (beginning with Marx) view Western capitalist society as the seedbed of alienation. Hence, although all cultural critics of this type are similar in most respects, they yet differ to some degree, depending on whether their inspiration is derived from the one or the other of these two intellectual traditions. Let us then, briefly and schematically, delineate their differences.

Those critics who derive their inspiration from Primitivism proceed from a list of characteristics that putatively distinguish primitive (in either of the two meanings of “primitive” mentioned above) and other Third World societies from modern Western society. For example, the former are authentic, the latter is inauthentic; the former are genuine, the latter, spurious; the former
are cooperative, the latter, competitive; the former are egalitarian, the latter, hierarchical; the former are integrated, the latter, conflictual; the former are solidarious, the latter, anomie.

According, now, to this group of critics, any or all of these contrasts signify one and the same thing: the cultural characteristics of Western society are morally estranging, hence ego-dystonic, for Western actors. In brief, globally speaking, the familiar culture is strange, not familiar, for the actors themselves.

For those critics who derive their inspiration from the second intellectual tradition, the cultural characteristics of modern Western society—economic, scientific, political, religious, medical, whatever—when compared with those of primitive and other Third World societies, are uniformly alienating. Hence, Western actors, it is held, are alienated from their psyches (which, I suppose, is what the Marxist notion of “false consciousness” refers to), from their bodies, from their families, from their work, from their social groups, from their ecosystems, indeed, from the cosmos itself.

In sum, since modern Western culture is (to use one of the favorite terms of this group of anthropologists) “totalizing” in its alienating effects, for Western actors their own culture is ego-alien. Once again, then, the familiar culture is strange, not familiar, for the actors themselves.

Taking into account both the cultural criticism and the scholarship of contemporary anthropology, I would now submit that what we have witnessed over the past decade or so among a large group of anthropologists is nothing less than an unremitting perception of the entire human world as “strange.” For if as scholars these anthropologists have minimized the familiar characteristics—the comprehensible and intelligible characteristics—of the strange, then as cultural critics they have maximized the strange characteristics—the ego-dystonic and ego-alien characteristics—of the familiar. In sum, for many anthropologists and (to reiterate my cautionary note at the beginning of this chapter) for many other social scientists and literary scholars as well, the familiar, no less than the strange, has become “Other.”

We may now perhaps understand why, previously, I claimed that Rosaldo’s characterization of this group of anthropologists—“my own group aside, everything human is alien to me”—is only half right. In order for that characterization to be entirely right, the qualifier (“my own group aside”) would have to be deleted.
How, now, it might be useful to ask, have we arrived at such a state of affairs? To begin with the conception of the familiar, is the judgment that Western society is ego-dystonic and ego-alien, while Third World societies (those not yet corrupted by the West) are ego-syntonic and ego-integrative—is that judgment grounded in the evidence of anthropological scholarship, or is it rather, at least to some degree, a construction—as Lévi-Strauss, for one, has suggested—of anthropological criticism?

Although the cultural critic would claim that the first alternative is the case, such a claim surely is paradoxical. For in order for the anthropologist, qua critic, to make that invidious judgment regarding Western society, he must be able to determine, qua scholar, that one or another non-Western society is ego-syntonic and ego-integrative for its actors. In short, he must possess the ability to enter and mentally inhabit their cultural world, to perceive it through their (not his) eyes, to grasp it by their (not his) concepts, and then to experience it through their (not his) emotions.

But if Third World cultures are “Other,” then the anthropologist, qua scholar, cannot possibly possess the ability to comprehend the thoughts and emotions that make up the minds of Third World actors, since their cultures, ex hypothesi, are incommensurate with his own. And if that is the case, then when that same anthropologist claims, qua cultural critic, that compared to Third World cultures, Western culture is ego-alien and ego-dystonic, that judgment cannot possibly be empirically grounded.

Until or unless that paradox is resolved, we must perhaps want to consider the explanation offered by Lévi-Strauss for that judgment. “It is not by chance,” Lévi-Strauss writes,

that the anthropologist is rarely on terms of neutrality with his own social group.... Objective factors in his past can probably be adduced to prove that he is ill- or unsuited to the society in which he was born.... If he tries to think straight, he will have to ask himself whether he is really justified in setting such great store by exotic societies (and the more exotic they are, the more he will prize them). Is this not rather a function of the disdain, not to say the hostility, which he feels for the customs of his own milieu? At home, the anthropologist may be a natural subversive, a convinced opponent of traditional usage; but no sooner has he in focus
a society different from his own than he becomes respectful of even the most conservative practices.8

Because Lévi-Strauss’s observations are consistent with my own, I am highly tempted, as a clinician manqué, to offer a psychodynamic gloss on that quotation. Since in this essay, however, I am wearing the hat of cultural critic (a critic, that is, of one subculture of contemporary social science), I must resist that temptation. Let us instead turn from the Otherness-of-the-familiar of anthropological criticism to the Otherness-of-the-strange of anthropological scholarship.

Since the Otherness-of-the-strange is based on the claim of cultural incommensurability, it too is paradoxical. For if that claim is valid, then Hilary Putnam’s comment on the analogous claim made by some few historians of Western science applies to anthropologists as well: namely, if cultures were incommensurable, then for the investigator who studies a cultural group other than his own, the communications of its actors would mostly consist of uninterpretable “noise.” And, to quote Putnam, if

we cannot interpret organisms’ noises at all, then we have no grounds for regarding them as thinkers, speakers, or even persons. In short, if Feyerabend (and Kuhn at his most incommensurable) were right, then members of other cultures, including seventeenth-century scientists, would be conceptualizable by us only as animals producing responses to stimuli (including noises that curiously resemble English or Italian). To tell us that Galileo had “incommensurable” notions and then go on to describe them at length is totally incoherent. (Italics in original.)9

Substitute, now, “Navaho” for “Galileo,” and the application of that passage to anthropology is clear. If strange cultures are not only different from, but are also incommensurate with, Western culture, then anthropologists would be incapable of describing, let alone interpreting, the cultures of the strange groups in which they conduct research. But since the proponents of this view (together with other anthropologists) do precisely that—they themselves describe and interpret strange cultures—those strange cultures cannot be so strange after all. In short, they cannot really be “Other.”
Why it is, then, that the proponents of this thesis theoretically insist upon it when their own work empirically confutes it, is, to say the least, yet another paradox. Although I can offer no simple resolution for that paradox, Lévi-Strauss, that great master of paradox, once again has. “Never,” Lévi-Strauss writes, “can [the anthropologist] feel himself ‘at home’ anywhere: he will always be, psychologically speaking, an amputated man.”¹⁰

Now I don’t know whether that is a valid resolution of that paradox or not. But having been previously informed by Tyler that all of us are “neutered,” and now being told by Lévi-Strauss that anthropologists are “amputated”—that combination of metaphors has (at least for a psychoanalytically oriented theorist like myself) some rather specific symbolic meanings that are more than a little anxiety producing. Hence, having refrained from offering a gloss on the previous quotation from Lévi-Strauss, it is best to let this quotation speak for itself, especially since I would prefer to close on an upbeat note—to close, that is (with apologies to the poet who stimulated the writing of this paper) not with a whimper but a bang.

For consider: If anthropologists can describe and interpret other cultures, then the strange cultures cannot be as strange as many contemporary anthropologists claim; and if anthropologists cannot describe and interpret other cultures, then there are no valid grounds for believing that our own—familiar—culture is as strange as they claim. Whichever is the case, only one of us—either we or they—can be “Other.” Hence, I was clearly wrong in claiming that contemporary anthropologists (or at least many of them) have made the entire human world strange; they have made only half of it strange.

That still leaves us with one unresolved question. Which half?

NOTES


2. T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace and
Company, 1950, p. 259. It might be observed that in viewing their own culture as inferior to primitive and Third World cultures, these anthropologists represent only the first point on a scale of (what might be called) “the depreciation of the familiar,” by some few Western academics and intellectuals. This scale can be delineated as follows: (a) As human beings, Westerners are culturally inferior to non-Western (primitive and Third World) peoples. (b) As a species, humans are (b1) little different from nonhuman species, if not (b2) inferior to them. (c) As psychological beings, humans are (c1) little different from machines and (c2) inferior to inert matter. Having already dealt with (a), the first point on this scale, let us proceed to (b1), its second point.

Here is psychologist Edward Tolman (who himself, it will be recalled, opposed the simple S-R theories of his time): “I believe that everything important is psychology (except perhaps such matters as the building up of the superego, that is, everything save such matters as involve society and words) can be investigated in essence through the continued experimental and theoretical analysis of the determiners of rat behavior at a choice point in a maze” (1938: 34).

Again, listen to psychologist Kenneth Lashley, having described how the microstoma (a tiny marine worm) acquires the nettles it needs for its protection by ingesting hydras: “Here in the length of half a millimeter are encompassed all of the major problems of dynamic psychology” (1938: 446).

For the third point on the scale, (b2), listen to biologist Stephen Jay Gould: “I do not see how we, the titular spokesmen for a few thousand mammalian species, can claim superiority over three quarters of a million species of insects who will surely outlive us all, not to mention the bacteria, who have shown remarkable staying power for more than three billion years” (quoted in Shaw 1986: 31).

Let us proceed now to (c1), the fourth point on the scale. In a delightful passage, psychologist Edward Boring (1946: 192) says: “I believe that robotic thinking helps precision of psychological thought, and will continue to help it until psychophysiology is so far advanced that an image is nothing other than a neural event, and object constancy is obviously something that happens in the brain. That time is still a long way off, and in the interval I choose to sit cosily with my robot, squeezing his hand and feeling a thrill—a scientist’s thrill—when he squeezes mine back again.”
With the coming of cognitive science, and its emphasis on mental representations, one might have thought that the machine model would have been discarded. If anything, the reverse is the case, especially among some few specialists in artificial intelligence (AI), for whom the equivalence of the computer and the human mind is virtually axiomatic. Thus, for the proponents of the “claim of strong AI,” “the appropriately programmed computer really is a mind and can be said literally to understand and to experience other cognitive states” (Gardner 1985: 171).

As a measure of the strong conviction (and affect) with which its proponents hold this claim, consider the response of computer scientist Douglas Hofstadter to the measured critique of philosopher John Searle (1980). “This religious diatribe against AI, masquerading as a serious scientific argument, is one of the wrongest, most infuriating articles I have ever read in my life” (quoted in Gardner 1985: 176).

The fifth and final point on the scale, (c2), is represented, startlingly enough, by some few contemporary poets. Thus, after observing that the most popular key word in new poetry is “stone,” critic Paul Breslin cites the following passage, taken from an interview of Galway Kinnell (the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet). “If you could go even deeper, you’d not be a person, you’d be an animal: and if you went deeper still, you’d be a blade of grass, eventually a stone. If a stone could speak, your poem would be its words” (quoted in Shaw 1986: 31).

Viewed with the perspective of these commentators, the cultural alienation of the anthropologists considered in this paper seems rather moderate. In either event, an intellectual historian might profitably address his energies to the question of how it is that a civilization in which the Psalmists viewed humans as “little lower than the angels” could have undergone a transformation of such a magnitude that contemporary biologists could come to view humans as inferior to insects, psychologists as little better than machines, and poets as inferior to stones.

3. In preparing this essay, I did not recall in which of Eliot’s essays I had originally read this line, nor did I remember that Eliot had credited the line (with a little license) to Coleridge. I am grateful to Helen Singer for refreshing my memory on both accounts.


5. Renato Resaldo, “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage: On the

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SUGGESTED READINGS

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