

Teaching the field: the order, ordering, and scale of knowledge

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In this paper I would like to reflect on the confrontational and contradictory forces that make us 'ethnographers' and 'anthropologists', and of the consequences that accompany the way we position ourselves against our discipline and against ourselves as practitioners of that discipline. The paper may thus be read as an elucidation of boundary-formations: of how we classify and fence the kind of knowledge that we believe to be studying/making, and how we concomitantly circumscribe and define ourselves as agents in doing such classification. In effect, this amounts to examining the ways in which we relate to the bodies of knowledge that make up our identities as 'anthropologists', looking at how we sort out the information that makes up such bodies of knowledge and that entitles us to 'know' anything at all.

I shall illustrate my discussion by way of an example, an example that itself throws into relief questions about what may be analytically conceived as 'anthropological' or 'ethnographic' knowledge; about *where* and *what* is the knowledge-field of our practices¹. The example is an account of my first experience of teaching anthropology, which took place whilst on fieldwork and following an invitation by a local university. The most salient feature about this example is that I ended up teaching the field (anthropology) to the field (students, some of whom eventually became friends and informants). A particular economy of information was revealed to me, one marked by a form of reduplicative and reduplicated knowledge. Students were exposed to knowledge that would eventually affect the way they would later report to me as informants. This exposure also led me to ask questions about the authorship of knowledge; that is, how analytically informed 'ethnographic' insights by the students became refractions of ethnographically informed 'analytical' classroom comments by the teacher. What Marilyn Strathern has called the 'ethnographic moment' (Strathern 1999: 6), the moment when the field of observation (fieldwork proper) is recreated in a reflective and analytical field (writing-up), thus took a particular twist. Reflection became a precondition for, and an outcome of, observation. This also prompted questions on the nature of information and of the tenuous line that separates it from knowledge. Furthermore, it made evident the extent to which the boundaries and divisions of all fields (knowledge and ethnographic, even geographic) are 'emplaced' within the fieldworker herself.

Finally, the paper also aims to describe how on returning to the home institution this experience of teaching 'the field' in turn affected the teaching I carried out at home. It seems to me that there is a special 'ethnographicness' about the teaching carried out by young scholars, whose experience of returning from the field is still fresh and recent. It is this 'ethnographicness' of anthropology

that I believe makes it an ideal quality to engage students in 'fields of knowledge' – a quality that allows students to become both observers and fieldworkers in the production of anthropological knowledge.

Teaching anthropology

My first experience of teaching anthropology goes back to March 1997. Shortly after arriving in the Chilean city of Antofagasta a local university invited me to take over two introductory courses to anthropology. These introductory courses were to be imparted to students of social work and educational studies. Although attending to different curricular needs, the courses' syllabi had many points in common and in that respect shared a specific vision of the discipline.

My students were not studying to become anthropologists. In fact, in line with what is common in many universities in developing countries, my employers' main concern was not with the provision of an 'academic' education, but with training good professionals, a point I was repeatedly reminded of. In being exposed to anthropology, my students were being taught how to educate their attention towards specific sets of problems, not how to think anthropologically about the world – the anthropology that I was to teach was to be used as a problem-solving tool. This of course also meant that my identity as an 'anthropologist' was very different from what I had always thought it to be. For my Chilean students I was a repository of information and knowledge of a very different kind to the orders of scholarship that my British students presumed me to hold. In Chile, for example, one of the modules I taught was called 'Ethnic identities'. The module aimed at introducing students to the ethnic groups that once inhabited (and, in some cases, still populate) the Chilean territory.

But there was nothing in the syllabus on the anthropological configuration of ethnicity as an ideational construct, or on the intermediations of class, religion, age, memory, etc., that make-up so-called ethnic identities. The course was effectively an overwhelmingly descriptive review of the habitat, culture and social organization of groups such as the Mapuches, Atacameños or Aymaras. The broader goal of the course was defined as that of teaching the 'Origin and nature of Culture; its concepts, characteristics, structure, dynamics and processes.' Culture was here being described as an almost organic whole, an extraneous entity whose laws needed to be studied and understood. I was told that students had to learn these for they would, at some point, have to deal with people belonging to different cultures and it was indispensable for them to know about their different habits and practices. 'Cultures', 'habits' and 'practices' were thus defined as absolute and irreducible categories, not because my fellow academics thought them to be so, but because in their professional future my students would need to keep them in mind in order to attend to the possible peculiarities of their patients or clients. The problems that social and educational workers face are real problems, I was reminded, not 'social constructions'.

On another front, one of the things that most stroke my attention as a lecturer in Chile was the 'density' of relationships between teachers and students. Students, for instance, were examined at least three times a semester, often

more. They were also asked to sign a name list on entering every class and no student with an attendance rate below 75 per cent was allowed to sit the end of semester exam. I was further told to set my students tasks and homework, and to make sure that they kept up with all assignments, asking questions in class if needed. A colleague who had gained his PhD in Spain warned me about the school-like feeling of university teaching in Antofagasta: students, he said, experience no real transition in upgrading to university education. They are overwhelmed with classes and have little time for personal study, which they anyway occupy in homework or assignments (in Antofagasta, mostly group projects). They are still 'spoon-fed' and experience only a marginal educational shock, except, perhaps, at an environmental level (leaving home and friends, etc.).

Despite the apparent 'school' discipline, however, I was surprised to find out that students were rarely expected to read, or to take an interest in the subject beyond the classroom. Most, if not all, teaching relied on handouts, and some students only seemed to take seriously the course the day a handout was available from the *Central de Apuntes* (Handouts' Office). Moreover, it seemed that of all arguments and points raised by the teacher in class only those that made their way to a handout were deemed relevant by students. It is not that students did not understand what they were being told to read or the arguments rehearsed in class discussions by fellow students, but that they failed to see the purpose of studying what was not in a handout. They showed little interest in making up arguments for themselves, and rarely asked questions that were not connected with clarifying or spelling out a point contained in the handout. Perhaps for the same sets of reasons, students had no experience in answering essay questions, having serious trouble trying to put together an argument and organizing and laying out a narrative. Soon I had to give up this form of examination and had to resort instead to multiple choice and fill-in-the-gaps questions, to which they were accustomed. And once I did so, their performance perked up notably, with most students gaining pass grades of 60 per cent or more.

It is not my duty, nor my interest here, to criticize the principles, if any, underlying this educational system, though I have no doubts that at this level the system was fuelled by the comparative lack of resources of the university and the national primary and secondary curricular needs that precede university education in Chile. The university library, for instance, had very few anthropology books in stock, so it was hardly a surprise to see students relying by default on their lecturers' handouts. The rare books that were available were so in translations not always easy to follow, an almost insurmountable difficulty when readers are learning about radically different conceptual worlds. I can almost count with the fingers on my hands the number of ethnographies that have been translated into Spanish, none of which were of course available in our library. The books that students had access to, in our library or in a bookshop, consisted of standard introductory textbooks and, occasionally, an odd translation of work by James Clifford or Clifford Geertz. The editorial politics of translation thus impinged with cruelty upon my students, who were being conspicuously left out

of what we, in the academic West, take for granted as the natural learning paths into our field. In this context, there was no natural 'anthropological' field of knowledge into which student-apprentices could incursion. If one describes the anthropology of Western academia as a vast structure of knowledge-pots (books, articles, internet resources, departmental seminars, mentoring relationships) through which neophytes have to navigate, then whatever 'anthropology' is for a developing country student, it will hardly resemble what it is for us (Cf. Gupta & Ferguson 1997: 28-29).

But I said above that my concern was not with the particular configuration of the educational system in Chile. Instead, I want to bring attention to how this configuration affected the body of anthropological knowledge that I taught and on its concomitant impact on the semblance of its practitioner, the 'anthropologist'.

Teaching ethnography

As the course advanced, I realised that most of my attempts at explaining and exemplifying instances of, say, Nuer politics or Dinka religion failed, for students had no images (visual or literary) to relate to beyond my descriptions. There were no films, no photographs, no drawings, no (secondary) literary descriptions with which to enrich my explanations. Eventually, I realised that the only examples I could profitably use would be those that my students could relate to. This was how I ended up talking to them about my own research and fieldwork, which touched upon their own experiences, as well as those of their parents and relatives. These were things that they knew about – in a sense, they knew too much about. But they were getting my work-in-progress reading of them, a vision that came to them refracted by the lens of the ethnographer.

It was naturally only a matter of time for my students to start to contest, qualify or reorient my analyses. This was itself a refracted and refracting process. Students would sometimes come to me with questions or comments about things that I had said months ago, and they would enrich or contradict my remarks with further insights or examples. Occasionally I would also come back to them, posing before them historical issues that I thought might illuminate present transformations, or simply rehearsing to them things that I had heard or was told elsewhere. Sometimes they would try to make sense of my work-in-progress ethnography by attempting to locate it within theoretical frames they had just recently learned about in our classes. They would for instance tell me about the 'habitus' of certain urban youth practices, or single out the 'embodied' spatial knowledge of the city held by women. To me, the value of their theorisations lied in the reduplicative and reduplicated quality of the information. Students were not only duplicating the knowledge they heard, but they were making sense of it in relation to themselves and to their fellow others – they were re-duplicating it in exchanges of reciprocal understanding.

The reverberating quality of this dialogue between students and teacher is what I call its 'ethnographicness'. [I use the term in a way akin to visual anthropologists and filmmakers when they speak of the 'ethnographicness' of ethnographic film (Banks 1992; Cf. MacDougall 1998; Ruby 2000).] My own

experience is no doubt an unusual instance of it, for of all places I literally happened to be 'in the field' and talking to my students about my own fieldwork. But I believe it to be well established now that we are in the wake of an intellectual period where strict classificatory boundaries are no longer held to be impenetrable, nor is the capacity to think ethnographically deemed an exclusive attribute of a people, at a time, in a place. It is illusory to keep a sacrosanct distinction between the field of observation (fieldwork proper) and the field of reflection and analysis (writing-up) (Cf. Gupta & Ferguson 1997). Marilyn Strathern has appositely called this bridging of fields an 'ethnographic moment' for an unfolding of moments, and not times or places, is what is taking place here (Strathern 1999: 6). In a sense, the 'ethnographicness' of the moment is 'emplaced' in the analyst, for it is she who carries with herself the horizon of her own ethnographic understanding. The web of conversations and dialogues that the ethnographer has weaved is 'emplaced' in the field of knowledge that she is willing or capable to map out (Gudeman & Rivera 1990).

Back in Chile my students thought 'ethnographically' because they were always attempting to locate their comments, and the insights and remarks of their fellow students, within the field of knowledge that we were all collectively attempting to map out. Our analyses were 'momentary', in that they were always in the making. There was a saliency to every comment, because every observation shaped the direction and turn of any comment-to-come. I may have been especially attentive to this because of the nature of the situation: In a way, it was my own investigation, and not just my classes, that were at stake. But it is no less true that it is futile to try to circumscribe the production of knowledge to particular places and times, and to believe that in the case of anthropology it is appropriate to delimit all observation to the field (of fieldwork) and leave all analysis for home. Reflection occurs in moments, not places, and although 'emplaced' within the anthropologist it is by no means solely her own. My students, for instance, contributed 'ethnographically' to my inquiry; and I always regarded their 'ethnographic contribution' of two orders: analytical and empirical. They were analysing and observing the same kind of things as I was, and our mutual observations further complicated (i.e. co-implicated) the organization of the information/knowledge that we were reciprocally transmitting to each others.

The peculiarity of my fieldwork situation threw into relief some interesting questions on the complex structure of knowledge-formations, on how specific constellations and arrangements of people-in-places affect the routes we take into, and the way we come to think about, such arrangements. This is why ethnography is an order of knowledge built upon a prior political ordering: why the constraints of a specific fieldwork situation (influenced by national budgets and schooling programmes, or the editorial agendas and marketing strategies of transnational publishing houses) led to a specific way of working out the field, and why it is therefore pointless of speaking of ethnography as if it happened only 'in the field', or as if it was exclusively a product of field-work. My larger point is that we define our 'ethnography', not by what we study, nor where we decide to install our study, but by the strategies and resources that we decide to employ (or serendipitously come to employ (Pieke 2000)) in order to understand an

ongoing situation. It is a process that stretches outside the field, and towards which contribute people that have little or nothing to do with the field. A friend, a relative or a student may provide us with a comment that, albeit cloaked in naivety, may nevertheless illumine an unexplored parcel of our ethnographic knowledge. This is a fact we all recognise when we cite friends or colleagues in the acknowledgements of an article or a book. Ethnography, then, is essentially a knowledge-practice. But not because it produces knowledge, but because it *mobilises* knowledge – perhaps the only way of thinking about the world at anything that resembles the speed at which it is running away.

The ethnography in teaching

Ethnography, I have been arguing, is not just something that we do somewhere, but the project of mapping out a field of knowledge. This project is conversational, a project to which people that know a lot about the ‘field’ may contribute, but also to which people that know very little may have something valuable to say in a moment of ingenuity. This is not to deny and undermine the importance of doing fieldwork. On the contrary: It aims at pointing the ways in which knowledge is organized. For it is rarely the case that the knowledge that we produce or gain maps neatly onto the pastoral distant ‘fields’ that we have for so long taken to be our only and authentic knowledge-locations (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). More often, the organization of knowledge tends to obey and follow political alliances and is equally influenced by things heard or read in places that have little in common with the people we study. This is why fieldwork is important. Because it is our primary conversational tool and our only means of discerning which conversations are relevant and which are not, which of those things we have heard or read about elsewhere may nevertheless still fit the field (of knowledge) that we are struggling to give an account of. Fieldwork is our means of discerning what remains ‘in’ and what drops ‘out’ – our means to cutting the net(field)work (Strathern 1996).

The conversational aspects of knowledge (what I have been calling its ‘ethnographicness’) is something that anthropologists seldom bring back to their institutional homes from the ‘field’, and that at any rate they never put to use when performing their ‘other’ task, that of teaching. That teaching can be ethnographic, though, is something that I hope to have shown above. By ethnographic, I insist, I do not mean that one’s teaching has to convey ethnographic information, but that one ought to make students think with and apply the categories of thought of a specific ethnographic situation.

There are good reasons to think that young scholars (post-fieldwork students and young lecturers) are in fact better positioned to think ethnographically than their senior fellows. One could well argue that of all academics it is young scholars who are best suited to engage ethnographically with students, for their fieldwork experience (and by this I mean their experience in working out a field of knowledge) is still fresh and recent, and plausibly more conversational and rich than that of their more senior colleagues. With seniority no doubt comes a vast and comprehensive (reading) knowledge of the field, methodological rigour, and

in-depth understanding of the debates and intellectual trends that define the discipline. Yet not without sadness or regret many senior scholars often admit that their last visit to the field took place ten or more years ago, and silently wonder where lies their authority to speak of a runaway world. In his latest book, for instance, Bruce Knauff notes his own nervousness, even the possible frailty of his academic repute, on returning to the field after a fifteen-year absence (Knauff 2002: 18-19).

Notwithstanding, and in a paradoxical twist hard to explain, ethnography has come to be esteemed for what is undoubtedly its least valuable and most superficial trait: as a marker of distinction. Ethnography has become a trait of seniority, a marker of distinction of the senior anthropologist, despite the already cited fact that her last ethnographic encounter often dates back to almost 'primitive' times. Thus understood ethnography has become something that one has done and holds, rather than a way of putting ideas to work in specific contexts of knowledge. Ethnographic knowledge is no longer valued for its soundness and freshness. Today, the pressures that the political structures of academia exact upon fieldwork returnees are to publish and 'theorise' their knowledge, not to teach and transmit the qualities of ethnography. So, the acquisition of ethnographic knowledge becomes institutionalised as a 'rite of passage', something that every aspiring anthropologist needs to go through and obtain. But in so doing this process taxes part of its 'quality', in particular what I have been calling its 'ethnographicness', its capacity to integrate and systematize knowledge of the changing world. In this light, the popular dictum, 'the best ethnography makes the best theory', a common say amongst senior academics, stands as a caricature of the general state of affairs in academic anthropology. For it is certainly not the case that young scholars are justly credited for holding what is supposedly our trademark: fresh and original ethnographic knowledge (better still: the capacity to think originally in ethnographic terms). This is a complex and richly paradoxical issue, which attests to structures of asymmetrical political knowledge. At its heart, the question has to do with the way we, as anthropologists, define ourselves in relation to our own field of knowledge, a 'field' that on each and every one of its definitional levels (geographic, theoretical, ethnographic) is sliced by political tensions.

Conclusion

Teaching is too broad a concept to say anything about the quality of the relationships that as anthropologists we may have with our students. What we teach and who we teach it to are fundamental issues in these relationships; and they reflect back upon ourselves in the form of images about our discipline that as educators and conveyors of knowledge we transmit to the wider world. Except that there is no real wider world. The world is a world of audiences, of hearings and contestations. We communicate with students and fellow academics in established contexts of dialogue and rapport. Contexts in which our position as interlocutors compromises our identity as anthropologists. I may have been an 'anthropologist' to both my Chilean and British students, but I was a different kind

of interlocutor in each case. My relationship to both groups may have been of the same order or type (student-teacher relationship); but the ordering and scale² of the relationships were different – for different were the *where*, *what* and *whom*.

The kind of knowledge that anthropology mobilises is *scalar*. Scales express in one idiom what something else signifies in a different idiom. Thermometers are scales because mercury (an idiom) expresses outside temperature (a different idiom). Anthropological knowledge allows us to rethink the concepts through which we think the world, and in that sense it allows us to rethink the world itself. We think again about old 'ways of worldmaking' by questioning them in the light of new and different 'ways of worldmaking' (Goodman 1978). The kind of knowledge that we use to do so is ethnography, and it is only by contrasting different orders of such knowledge (different ways of worldmaking, or different ethnographic worlds) that we can produce the trick of anthropological knowledge.

Many hold in contempt the task of teaching, or see it as a burdensome obligation. To those who do so, my answer is that they have not quite understood what the difference between ethnography and anthropology is, nor why the former is indispensable to the latter. Teaching is a fundamentally ethnographic venture, for there is no way of making people understand a conceptual world other than making them participants of such a world, engaging them in the reproduction of the relevant contexts of knowledge. But if there is an intrinsic ethnographicness in every act of teaching, then there is also an element of scalar knowledge in its performance; that is, a traversing of and crossing through different orders of knowledge. For teaching involves too a reworking and translation of conceptual worlds, making intelligible in one idiom what is incomprehensible in another.

Marilyn Strathern has recently analysed the qualities of 'relations' and argued that they have two properties: that they are holographic, and that they are complex. This complexity and holographicness is what makes relationships capable of crossing scales (Strathern 1995). In this paper, I have tried to unpack the complexity of the student-teacher holography, as well as outline the scalar journeys that we ourselves go through as teachers and anthropologists when putting together our anthropological knowledge. Of all relations, perhaps the relation between a teacher and her students should stand as the paradigm of 'deep holography', for it is in this relational context that our field is evoked and instantiated at its highest degree of complexity. When talking to our students we are summoning a geographic-cum-ethnographic-cum-anthropological field, and we are struggling to systematize and present this field to them. Knowledge-wise, teaching evinces the longest duree of anthropological thought: from working out the field, to doing fieldwork, to thinking through and sharing our findings, and comparing and discussing and writing about them, to, finally, teaching them. Teaching contains all these moments, and encapsulates them. It is the paradigmatic form – if there ever was one – of anthropological knowledge. That the political structures of academia have failed to recognise so, esteeming, for instance, the importance of publishing above that of teaching, speaks once more of the very un-anthropological principles that lie at the root of our 'field'.

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¹ The argument in this paper is premised on the prior definitional distinction between ethnography and anthropology, a distinction I claim lies in the different orders of knowledge they each mobilise. The *Anthropology Matters Journal*, 2003-1
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knowledge of ethnography is of the working type, where the aim is to gain a working understanding of what is going on in a particular situation – to work out a field of knowledge (thence, ‘field-work’). The knowledge of anthropology is scalar (see below), in that already worked out fields of knowledge (or ethnographic models) are set against one another in order to try to cast new light or throw into relief previously unnoticed aspects of a knowledge-situation. In this sense, I take, for example, Marilyn Strathern’s ‘The gender of the gift’ to be a work of ethnography (albeit no doubt highly analytic and ideational), whilst her later work on new reproductive technologies (where Melanesian categories are used to rethink what she calls Euro American concepts) seems to me of an anthropological bent (Strathern 1988; 1992; 1999)

² By ‘ordering’ I mean the way knowledge and information are mobilised and put together: from funding bodies to handouts, from national educational curricula to libraries or bookstores. By ‘scale’ I mean the ways of transferring knowledge: the conceptual conduits and idioms used to make information and knowledge flow from one interlocutor to another. There is no doubt that the two cannot be kept separate, and that the resources available for the organization of knowledge affect the modes knowledge will be and is transmitted.