



Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object

Johannes Fabian (Foreword), Matti Bunzl (Foreword)

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Fabian's study is a classic in the field that changed the way anthropologists relate to their subjects and is of immense value not only to anthropologists but to all those concerned with the study of man. A new foreword by Matti Bunzl brings the influence of Fabian's study up to the present.

Time and the Other is a critique of the notions that anthropologists are "here and now," their objects of study are "there and then," and that the "other" exists in a time not contemporary with our own.

Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object Details

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From Reader Review Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object for online ebook

Francisco Reis says

Time and other, como o próprio autor reconhece em várias entrevistas e no prefácio de uma reedição de 2001, é um livro difícil, que levanta problemas demais e desenvolve seus argumentos de modo que se torna difícil de acompanhá-los. De qualquer maneira, resumidamente sua argumentação percorre as sendas da filosofia romântica alemã, sobretudo Hegel, os fundamentos epistemológicos da antropologia no evolucionismo, no difusionismo, no funcionalismo inglês e estruturalismo francês para postular alguns problemas cruciais das condições de possibilidade de uma teoria do conhecimento antropológico: o que distancia o tempo do observador do tempo do observado no trabalho de campo? Como o conhecimento etnográfico é afetado pelas relações historicamente estabelecidas de poder e dominação entre a sociedade do antropólogo e aquela que ele estuda? Se todo enunciado antropológico sobre o o outro está condicionado pela experiência do etnógrafo, por que essa experiência é escamoteada por pretensões objetivas? Até o Iluminismo o tempo predominante era o salvífico, o da teleologia medieva-cristã, quando se passa a uma concepção secular do tempo como história natural. O tempo da salvação era incorporativo e inclusivo, o tempo naturalizado e secularizado se tornou exclusivo e expansivo. Essas rupturas nas modalidades de tempo (de sagrado > secular) e nas relações (o pagão já marcado para a conversão > o selvagem ainda não pronto para a civilização). O civilizado justifica sua práxis colonialista perante o selvagem à medida que este está em outro tempo e distante no espaço.

A questão epistemológica fundamental que se levanta aqui é que as categorizações temporais presentes em qualquer relação com o outro subsumem determinações históricas e políticas no conhecimento etnográfico. No senso comum, a antropologia é uma provedora de distância temporal. Mas segundo os fenomenólogos a interação social implica um tempo intersubjetivo entre os participantes, necessita-se criar uma coetaneidade para haver comunicação. Apesar de novas disciplinas como a etnometodologia e a etnografia da fala darem maior reconhecimento a essa intersubjetividade, permanece o modelo de comunicação da objetividade vinculado ao distanciamento temporal entre os participantes. A essa persistente tendência em negar os referentes da antropologia em um tempo que não o do produtor do discurso antropológico, Fabian chama de negação da coetaneidade, ou o alocronismo da antropologia. No cerne de toda argumentação e discussão de Fabia está o objetivo de conseguir que a coetaneidade como condição de possibilidade de alcançar o objeto antropológico.

Para o autor, a história antropológica está repleta de exemplos de luta contra a coetaneidade: diário de Malinowski é uma pausa nessa luta, os tristes trópicos de Lévi-Strauss é uma tentativa poética nesse ato epistemológico. Essas experiências de coetaneidade são esquecidas ou negadas pelo antropólogo nas ritualizações e invocações textuais tipo “observação participante” e “presente etnográfico” que organizarão seus textos em termos de tempo físico ou tipológico a fim de evitar sua qualificação como poesia, ficção ou propaganda política.

A descrença racional ocidental na presença dos ancestrais, e na eficácia da magia, repousam na rejeição das ideias de coexistência temporal implícitas nessas ideias e práticas, mas para estudar e compreender o culto e a magia ancestrais precisamos estabelecer relações de coetaneidade com as culturas estudadas. Cisão aporética da antropologia, uso esquizogênico do tempo: reconhecimento da coetaneidade em algumas etnografias (necessidade cognitiva reconhecível) e negação da coetaneidade na maior parte da teorização e literatura antropológicas (política). Além da cumplicidade política e moral da disciplina com a atividade colonial, há a cumplicidade cognitiva.

Fabian recusa as estratégias de contornar (usos da relatividade cultural) e anular as tendências alocrônicas e esquizocrônicas do tempo pela antropologia estabelecida.

Enfim, J. Fabian delineia um programa complexo, com uma crítica epistemológica radical da antropologia que em muitos aspectos iria se antecipar ao livro “Writing Culture”, que esboçou outro programa de crítica e autocrítica da antropologia e que, talvez de forma injusta, fez mais barulho na antropologia do que o livro de Fabian.

Gary Bruff says

Fabian's Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object marks a point of transformation in the rhetorics and epistemologies of anthropologists everywhere. The work is over thirty years old now, so much of its spirit of deconstructive discipline-flaying seems needlessly acerbic, especially since Fabian's essential conclusions about how not to do ethnography are now commonplaces which are widely accepted.

Back in 1983, when this book was written, symbolic anthropology was still in vogue. Different cultures were typically seen as different sorts of languages, so an understanding of the grammar of a culture-language would in theory enable the anthropologist to read a people's text or to see the world from a cultural insider's point of view. Understanding another culture meant deciphering its symbols and adopting its viewpoint. But what really occurred apparently was a wholesale buying into this culture-as-language metaphorical discourse that had posed as science, more or less with success. (After all, as Kuhn argued, where would real science be without rhetorical figures, metaphors, and analogies?) Fabian ultimately jettisons all of the tropes and figures which obscure the obvious fact that all people on Earth have been here just as long as everybody else. Without this coevalness (where we are all modern in a strictly chronological sense), anthropology is no better than christianity, since both ethnographers and missionaries leap into the dark spaces of the planet to find the unsaved. Anthropology preserves the 'preliterate' in the name of science. Christianity seeks to save the 'heathen' in the name of God.

I recently saw a mini-documentary on France24 that really brought this critical perspective home for me. An ethnographic filmmaker was being interviewed while a video in the background showed naked people in some Philippine jungle. They were not called savages, nor primitives. Yet they were presented as an image of the unimaginable past, of the time before (occidental) human memory. This point was constantly reinforced by the filmmaker's insistence that these folks have not changed or moved in tens of thousands of years. How did he know this? I guess because they are naked and are therefore from the Garden. Before the fall. What we seemed to be looking at (and vision is the dominant trope in anthropological discourse, seeing is believing after all) is the way we were, collectively and individually. Fabian talks a lot about the way shifters, especially tenses, are used in the rhetoric of ethnography to eradicate temporal distance on the one hand while denying the preliterate and the uncivilized any depth of history on the other. Traditional ethnography erases time by using the present tense to make past events from fieldwork appear more vivid. But such ethnography will also rely on tropes that make the genuinely coeval and contemporary appear primordial or archaic.

But does anthropology really 'make its object?' To be sure, there is a whole lot of reification and objectification of any cultural phenomenon under study. The authority of the author demands that an object be found, and if not found, created. To truly see (!) what is going on in a culture, one must observe oneself observing. This reflexive pose is the escape hatch to Fabian's system. Indeed, the benefits of reflexivity are both ethical and epistemological. Getting the ethnography right is not just a matter of being fair to the other culture. It also entails bending our own understanding toward alternative cosmologies in order to move past the good, common sense of the discursive assumptions embedded in our own 'native' models. Saying that all cultures are valid or that some cultures are preliterate or preindustrial does not solve the problem of how to

come to terms with the chronic strangeness of the Rousseauian other.

Although I agree with Fabian on nearly every point, I can't help but wonder: 'When do we go from here?' By capsizing all possible notions of shared cosmology, are we left with only an excess of skepticism? What if all that remains is a sense that nothing can (or should) be done? But if nihil ex nihilo, if nothing comes of nothing, then this nihilistic anthropology devolves into a foundational critique of time itself. Which is not such a bad thing. Why ask astrophysicists about the nature of time? Why not ask the Jivaro or the Hopi, instead?

Despite its abundant questions, Fabian's book often lacks cogent answers. By burning the 'map' of human 'eternity,' our sociocultural understanding seems limited to making textual gestures in the temporal mirror. Now that we 'see' where we as anthropologists have come from (not from primitives, but from pseudoscientists), how can we now 'envision' a new path forward into new times and new places?

Brenna says

This is a text I continually return to, both for writing (on cultural and film) and in my day-to-day thinking on the politics of representation. Definitely a foundational text.

Rallie says

This is a text that is vital to the social sciences - I would argue that you can't really approach social science research without at least some familiarity with this text.

Adam says

I read this for my Oral History class. It is another book we are constantly reminded is crucial and foundational and that conveniently proves to be near impossible to make any sense of, which seems more than a bit funny. I enjoyed the couple of chapters that made sense to me and his overall message is really important. I definitely plan to come back to it one day when I have more time.

Jim Angstadt says

This is the kind of book that one would expect an out-of-touch academic to author. Start in the middle, ramble, repeat. Maybe there is something of value here, but the narrative makes it difficult to tell. Bailed early.

Leslie says

complicated book - great message

Minh-Ha says

a critique of anthropology and its imperialist construction of "time" -- i come back to this book all the time!

Naeem says

A very difficult book. But it got me started thinking about this: temporal displacement. The idea is that besides killing , assimilating, and ignoring others, we can also act as if they live in a different developmental time; that we do not share time with them. This was/is a crucial insight about how life works in modern times.
