

The Prejudices of Anthropology

By Andreas Lloyd.

During the past quarter of a century, anthropology has gradually lost its innocence. Not so much in the Tristes Tropiques manner of losing its object of study but rather in the confused manner of losing its epistemological self-confidence. The relatively calm waters of anthropology – dominated by the absolutism of Marxist and structuralist theories – became troubled by the rise of new theoretical currents such as social constructivism, post-modernism and post-structuralism that threatened to wash away those delicately built sand castles of belief in epistemological truth.

Unintentionally, this aqueous anxiety has brought the discipline closer to philosophy than ever before. As Clifford Geertz puts it: “It is not that their borders overlap, it is that they have no borders anyone can, with any assurance, draw. It is not that their interests diverge, it is that nothing, apparently, is alien to either of them.” (Geertz 2000: ix).

Both disciplines seek to understand man and his experience of being in the world – and this encompasses more or less everything in the spectrum of human life and science, if not the direct weighing and gauging of the world, then certainly the reasons, motivations and explanations behind an beneath it.

The basis of philosophy is discussion, since all philosophic theories in one way or another is conjecture. It’s a discipline that thrives on internal dissent. And even though truth (epistemological or otherwise) has been the goal for more than two thousand years, the failure to bring any definite answers any closer has never seemed to have hurt the scientific integrity of the discipline.

Anthropology, on the other hand, born out of a positivist tradition and vying to be a “hard” social science for most of its short life, has been left quite vulnerable by this rather sudden realization of fallibility. Fieldwork and ethnographic data that is the basis of anthropology has given the discipline more than mere conjecture to base its theories on. This experience of being there – in the field – is our key to understanding and theorizing about “the Other.”

But if this data no longer can be accepted as scientific evidence, how does anthropology differ from philosophy? And how can we as anthropologists claim to understand “the Other” without the scientific legitimacy and authority of our methods?

The answers may very well be found in philosophy. In this essay I will briefly introduce the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer as a key to explore the theoretical approaches to Virgin Birth discussed by Edmund Leach and discuss how this philosophical ontology can help anthropology regain its composure.

The philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) was a student of Martin Heidegger and an avid proponent of hermeneutics, that cross-disciplinary art of understanding. But Gadamer made it abundantly clear that, to him, hermeneutics is not a method for understanding but an attempt "to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place" (Gadamer 2002: 129¹). Therefore, the title of his principal work “Truth and Method” (1960) is not meant to indicate a methodological work – rather it is meant as an ironical matter for debate: Truth and method – because you most likely can’t have both. Gadamer confronts the method-based science that has been dominant since René Descartes’ “Discourse on the Method” of 1637. Gadamer argues that science isn’t all method, and that we should work to describe what understanding *is* – not what it *ought* to be according to a specific cognitive ideal.

According to Gadamer, human rationality is not free nor total but limited by tradition and history. And the notion of rationality of the enlightenment period is just one such case of a limited historical phenomenon (Gulddal & Møller 2002:34).

Thus understanding always takes place within traditions and meanings that we only are half-aware of and therefore cannot take into consideration. Tradition is that which is valid without justification, and we perceive the world through prejudices, assumptions and fore-meanings that support our limited rationality (Gadamer 2002:143). Gadamer bases this on Heidegger’s notion of the “fore-structure of understanding” – that the process of understanding is a constant and basic part human existence that is “always already” in process – and tries to rehabilitate the conception of prejudice from its common negative

¹ My translations of the Danish text – cf. the reference list.

connotations in order to show that it is something essential and inevitable in our perception of the world. These prejudices are merely the terms of understanding, and no guarantee of truth or accuracy.

Understanding is always interpretation, and works through the hermeneutic circle: The preconceptions of the interpreter are tested on the object with its history and accumulated meaning which in turn tests the prejudices of the interpreter. Through a continuous testing of both interpreter and object, the interpreter will become aware of his own prejudices and hopefully shed the inhibiting and inexpedient prejudices and instead develop the productive ones. Understanding to Gadamer is like a “fusion of horizons”: The horizon or field of vision of interpreter combines with the horizon of the object of study to share a common ground where both horizons, both sets of prejudices are at stake and a new interpretation is created. Each new interpretation is dependent on the horizons of interpreter and object, and since the relationship between these two are continually changing through the constant testing of prejudices, no two interpretations will ever be the same. Gadamer likens this inexhaustible supply to a fountain: Always shedding and exposing new meaning (Gadamer 2002: 171).

In this way no interpretation can ever be finite. The object of study will always look different with the change of historical or cultural distance or light. Gadamer has created a sort of anti-method – a ontology of understanding: In order to understand, you cannot allow yourself to work within a limited scientific theoretical paradigm that might limit your understanding – you must seek to acknowledge your prejudices and use them to your advantage to listen to “the Other” with as open a mind as possible and create as useful or truthful an interpretation as you can.

Virgin Births

Examples of how these prejudices can play a decisive part – especially if they are not acknowledged – in the anthropological project of understanding and analyzing cultural phenomena and social relations, can be found in Edmund Leach’s essay “Virgin Birth” (1966). Prompted by the fact that many anthropologists (he mentions Melford Spiro and other “latter-day neo-Tylorians” (Leach 1969: 99)) have a “predisposed way of think” of their object of study – the natives – as primitive and irrational, Leach seeks to show how this prejudice limits the possibility of understanding. Leach compares the cultural value

attributed to Virgin Birth among Australian aboriginal tribesmen, among the Brahman of the Kanara province of India and in Christian mythology. There are variations between the three but generally all of them use religious faith to explain the occurrence of Virgin Birth. The reason the three cases are not treated alike by (western) anthropologists is, according to Leach, that “they have shown extraordinary squeamishness about the analysis of Christianity and Judaism, religions in which they themselves or their close friends are deeply involved.” (Leach 1969: 109f). These anthropologists do not want their own religious practices compared to their object of study and therefore they try to explain the native Virgin Birth as irrational and the natives as ignorant.

In the perspective of the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer, Leach is discarding a prejudice that is inhibiting and limiting to his understanding. In place of the ethnocentric and outdated prejudice of the neo-Tylorians, Leach introduces a structuralist prejudice that can explain all religious myths and stories as variations on a single structural theme (ibid. 109). Leach seeks epistemological truth through Weberian disenchanted rationality, but he is aware that such metaphysical issues as religion cannot be explained thus.

Instead he attempts to work his way around this by comparatively studying the variations between different religious beliefs. This new prejudice is aware of its limitations in understanding religion and this awareness will certainly help in bringing about the fusion of horizons that constitutes the interpretative act.

The structuralist prejudice that Leach advocates is a good example of the positivist approach that has dominated anthropology. The ideal of epistemological truth has been a heavy burden for anthropology and the other humanistic disciplines that use interpretation as their primary method. All prejudices are structured in some manner to categorize knowledge, and it is through these structures that we perceive the world. Leach interprets the world through the structuralist prejudice, but since all interpretation of the world is a constant and continuous process, no epistemological truths can be reached.

The American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey has proposed an alternative to epistemological truth called existential truth. He argues that rather than searching for an unreachable ideal of truth, it is better to find helpful truths that actually improve our lives (Dewey 1958). This is very much in accordance with Gadamer who says that human

cognition is necessarily limited by tradition and that epistemological truth may well be out of our reach – at least in the human and social sciences where interpretation and prejudice plays such important parts.

Truth and Method – and of anthropological authority

So where does this leaves anthropology as a scientific discipline? Anthropology is still based on ethnographic material gathered and interpreted by anthropologists. But with the ontology of philosophical hermeneutics we cascientific discipline? Anthropology is still based on ethnographic material gathered and interpreted by anthropologists. But with the ontology of philosophical hermeneutics we can be much more aware of the limitations of our own interpretations and our inevitable dependency of prejudice to create meaning in the world, we can work to make the best possible interpretation based on this awareness. So far, the anthropological method has been part of the prejudice of the positivist enlightenment paradigm which has dominated all scientific work for the past two centuries. But in attempting to interpret cultural phenomena and social relations, we have to be aware of the limits that this positivist prejudice imposes on our understanding. Method does not ensure understanding – being open and aware of our prejudices will help to that end.

It is no longer a question of gathering knowledge epistemologically but rather existentially – as the hermeneutic circle that is the essence of interpretation is infinite and no epistemological truth concerning such fluid and transitive subject matters as cultural phenomena and social relations will be possible.

But neither should we necessarily accept Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutic ontology as a final solution. It is just yet another prejudice that we have to work with and which distinguished philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas already have criticized (though their criticism is beyond the scope of this essay).

Either way, this does not really help the weak epistemological self-confidence of the discipline but it gives us an alternative. As to the scientific authority and legitimacy of anthropology, the problem is not necessarily as big as may be imagined: Just as philosophy has managed without definite answers, so must anthropology adopt to being more of a speculative science. The authority rests not with any method that we use, but with the usefulness of the truth we find. And the rest of the scientific community is not

necessarily discouraged at the prospect of the inevitable confusion of personal interpretations, for as Clifford Geertz concludes: "... the field [of anthropology] seems not only to stay reasonably intact but, what is more important, to extend the sway of the cast of mind that defines it over wider and wider areas of contemporary thought. (...) In our confusion is our strength." (Geertz 2000: 97). This confusion will keep the waters of anthropology fresh and lively like Gadamer's fountain: Always exposing new meaning to be interpreted.

References

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