Rethinking Ethnographic Practice in Anthropology:
Challenges and Transformations

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ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to investigate some of the recent shifts in conducting and writing ethnography in socio-cultural anthropology. Overtime, anthropological thought has undergone a series of major transformations which have reshaped many of our notions, theoretical perspectives, and research methods. Ethnographic practice has traditionally relied on studying spatially localized societies and cultures. However, in the last few years there has been a serious effort to conceptualize ethnography beyond the idea of studying a culture in a geographically defined and bounded field. This essay is primarily concerned with the applications and implications of new forms of ethnography such as multi-sited ethnography, network ethnography, reflexive ethnography, and virtual ethnography. Forces of globalization and transnationalism, in addition to contemporary debate on themes such as subjectivity/objectivity, self/other, and modernism/ postmodernism, have played a pivotal role in the development of these shifts and the emergence of new forms of ethnography.

Keywords: Socio-Cultural Anthropology, Ethnography, Multi-sited, Virtual, Network, Reflexive, Crisis of Representation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the midst of academia’s current preoccupation with forces of globalization and transnationalism, social scientists are engaged in a serious discourse which seeks to understand and explain both the specificity and complexity of the contemporary moment. The current process of capitalist restructuring and its accompanied multidimensional processes have reshaped our traditional ways of understanding certain issues such as power, identity, culture, place, and border. Along these lines, anthropologists find it necessary to rethink some of their theories, approaches, and research methods.

We can no longer assume the existence of a natural and automatic relationship between culture and place. The classical view of culture as being bounded and rooted in place seems now to be fragile. Furthermore, the conventional dichotomies of “inside vs. outside”, “here vs. there”, and “near vs. faraway” have lost much of their credibility and validity. Currently, the subject of transnationalism is receiving a great attention from scholars in different disciplines. The emphasis is placed on understanding the intertwined processes that play a crucial role in forming the dynamic relationship between culture and place. Appadurai (1996), for instance, argues that the new global cultural economy is so complex and overlapping and is largely mediated by technology, media and imagination. Dirlik (1996) too calls for the need to rethink the local and to keep its boundaries open or porous.

Recently, several ideas and thoughts have been suggested to rethink our methods of conducting and writing ethnography. The term “ethnography” is employed in an anthropological context to refer to the product of a fieldwork research and to the primary method of studying societies and cultures. It should be noted that ethnography, which was at some point exclusive to anthropology, has recently emerged as an interdisciplinary practice. Its authority and rhetoric have spread to many fields where culture is considered a newly problematic object of description and critique (Clifford, 1986). Other disciplines such as political science, sociology, media studies, and cultural studies have increasingly turned to ethnographic practices.

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2. ANTHROPOLOGY AND FIELDWORK

Ethnographic research is deeply embedded in the anthropological tradition. Some anthropologists take it to the extreme by arguing that ‘without fieldwork there is no anthropology and without anthropology there is no fieldwork.’ While such claim may not necessarily be true, it reflects the importance of fieldwork research in anthropology.

Since the emergence of anthropology as a science in the 19th century, ethnographic research has undergone major transformations. Early anthropologists did not use fieldwork in studying and writing about cultures. They relied mainly on reports and documents produced by travelers, missionaries and explorers. Such anthropologists are usually labeled as ‘armchair anthropologists.’ For instance, the British anthropologist Edward Tylor, who proposed his famous definition of Culture in 1871, is considered an armchair anthropologist.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, a new type of anthropology referred to as ‘verandah anthropology’ began to emerge. It was practiced by anthropologists who were working for colonial governments. Anthropologists began to leave their homes, offices, and libraries and go to the field. However, rather than going to the people to study them in their natural settings, verandah anthropologists would stay in a colonial settlement. In other words, this type of fieldwork was based on the premise of people coming to the anthropologist rather than the anthropologist going to the people.

This was followed later by a major transformation manifested in the adoption of Participant-Observation as a primary method in conducting ethnographic research. Anthropologists began to observe and participate with people on a daily basis, relying primarily on first-hand observation, through their immersion in the lives of their subjects for an extended period of time. Bronislow Malinowski (1884-19420), the Polish-born social anthropologist, is considered one of the first to lay the foundations of employing participant observation in ethnographic practice through his own fieldwork amongst the Trobriand Islanders in the South Pacific during WW1.

Most of early anthropological studies were considered more or less ethnographic by virtue of their exotic subject matter. Early ethnographic endeavors were conducted in far off places and sought to study exotic cultural practices of non-Western, small-scale societies, particularly those practices that were rapidly vanishing. Studying the “exotic other” was considered at some point one of the distinctive features of the discipline of anthropology.

3. STUDYING DETERRITORIALIZED CULTURES

In the late 1950s and 1960s, the predominant idea in anthropology was to study and describe a culture that exists “out there.” Currently, such notion is widely contested. Cultures and group identities are no longer understood as “tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous” (Appadurai, 1996: 48). Even the smallest geographical places are considered homes of multiple cultures rather than a single culture. Social thinkers in general and anthropologists in particular are increasingly interested in studying decentralized and deterritorialized social interactions and organizations. As Gupta and Ferguson (1997) point out, all associations of place, people and culture should be explained as social and historical creations rather than natural facts. The emphasis is on the complex processes through which cultural forms are invented, reworked and transformed. Culture-like people, capital, technology, and ideology- has become more mobile and deterritorialized than ever. In Edward Said’s words, we now live in a “generalized condition of homelessness” (1979:18). In this sense, the anthropological notion of “the field” is being redefined not as a bounded locality, which can be physically entered and existed, but rather as a decentralized location with abstract framing of boundaries. In sum, the notion of the field as site is being reoriented into the field as flow.

4. MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY

Conventional ethnography is essentially based on intensive participation and observation in a single research site and within a local context. However, one could argue that this type of ethnography may fail to acknowledge the mobility and circulation of cultural formations and meanings. Therefore, a new mode of ethnographic research that moves from a single site into multiple sites to examine a more comprehensive mapping of cultural formations has been proposed. The premise of this type of research is to follow an item (be it a person, a plot, a story, a metaphor or a conflict) through different
settings. G. Marcus, who is considered a pioneer in the adoption of multi-sited ethnography, defines it as a “research self-consciously embedded in a world system,” that “moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (1995:96).

Multi-Sited ethnography, known also as “mobile ethnography,” has initially been employed by researchers interested in the topic of transnational migration. In light of increasing transnational cultural flows of late capitalism and postcolonialism, several scholars (Rouse, 1991; Ong, 1999; Glick-Schiller et al., 1995) have studied migration as a circular process through which the migrant simultaneously develops attachments and connections to both host and home places. Transnational migration is analyzed as:

the process by which immigrants forge and sustain simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement…..

Transmigrants are immigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across national borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state (Glick-Schiller et al., 1995: 48).

Multi-sited ethnography enables us to study the process of migration within frames or fields that span geographical, cultural and political borders. Moreover, it calls for the need to rethink some terms such as diaspora, displacement, border, and territory. This implies that the researcher literally follows her/his subjects across borders and tracks the associations and networks developed by the migrant. Accordingly, migrants’ experience (social, economic, political, and cultural) and movement present a major challenge to fixity, stability, and boundedness.

In his ethnographic article entitled “Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism,” Roger Rouse (1991) traces the movement of migrant working-class Mexicans between Augililla, Mexico and Redwood City, California, U.S. As wage-laborers in the U.S., Mexican migrants develop what Rouse calls “transnational migrant circuit” through socio-economic and spatial ties they construct across borders. Rouse urges us to rethink our traditional notion of migration as unidirectional and final movement of migrants from one place to another, known as the “bipolar model.” Home and host places are not understood as dichotomies separated in time and space. Instead, they are intertwined and inextricably bound together. This explains why Rouse seeks to draw our attention to study the border zone which is rapidly proliferating in the age of globalization and transnational migration.

5. CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION AND AUTHORITY: TOWARD REFLEXIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

Over the past 20 or so years, anthropology has witnessed a considerable shift in the way anthropologists understand and write about themselves and others. The so-called ‘crisis of representation,’ which became predominant during the 1980s, has reshaped our understanding of issues such as reflexivity, agency, and authority. It principally emerged as a critique of the colonial heritage in the discipline of anthropology, mainly to rectify anthropologists’ misrepresentations of their subjects in both researching and writing. Anthropologists are no longer in a position of superiority vis-à-vis their subjects. Hence, rethinking issues such as truth, objectivity, power, and representation has been placed high on the anthropological agenda. In her classical essay, Laura Nader (1972) draws our attention to the asymmetrical relations between researchers and researched subjects, emphasizing the necessity for anthropologists to “research up/study up” societies.

On the other hand, crisis of representation has exposed the ethical and moral dilemmas encountered in the anthropological research. Many anthropologists have suggested a shift from ‘realist ethnography’ to ‘reflexive ethnography.’ The former is primarily concerned with issues such as objectivity, factuality, and dominance of the ethnographer’s voice. The latter, however, is considered as much a literary as a scientific activity, providing not facts but partial truths. Clifford (1986), for instance, points out that ethnographies can be seen as fictions. Put another way, ethnographic truth is incomplete, fragmented, contested and is always in the process of making. Since there are now multiple ways and forms of knowing, speaking and gaining truth, we can no longer know or search for the whole truth. This implies that cultural accounts are constructed and interpreted as texts.

Broadly defined, reflexivity means turning back on self, a process of self-reference. In the context of social research, it refers to the idea that the personnel and
process of doing research affect the final product of the research. Such effects are to be found in all phases of the research process (Davies, 1999:4). Reflexive ethnography reveals the stories, or what might be called the behind-the-scene stories, behind the main story that appears in the published report. It allows the ethnographer to speak of topics that were previously considered irrelevant or marginal such as desire, violence, confusions, struggles, and economic transactions with informants (Clifford, 1986:14), in addition to personal accounts of the trials and tribulations of fieldwork experience.

Furthermore, reflexive ethnography demonstrates how power relations keep shifting between the anthropologist and the studied people. Multiple voices and viewpoints are being incorporated into the process of writing. Voices of people who were previously considered marginal are now treated as an integral part of the ethnography. The researched people are no longer viewed as passive informants but rather as active consultants. Therefore, the ethnographer, whose main role becomes to facilitate or moderate the interaction between readers and informants-consultants, speaks ‘with’ or ‘along side’ rather than ‘for’ the people. S/he does not have the ultimate or automatic authority to represent subjects. Put another way, we have begun to shift away from what is referred to as authored ethnographies, in which the voice of the researcher dominates. This explains why most recent ethnographies have taken the form of auto-biographical accounts.

It should be noted that the postmodern perspective insists on issues such as de-authorization, self-reflexivity, subjectivity, and multiplicity. It also emphasizes the endless proliferation of meanings, and radically questions the totaling accounts. The postmodern ethnographer seeks to evoke rather than to describe a culture or even a moment. Richardson explains the tasks the ethnographer should remain constantly and critically attentive to:

Although we are freer to present our texts in a variety of forms to diverse audiences, we have different constraints arising from self-consciousness about claims to authorship, authority, truth, validity, and reliability. Self-reflexivity unmasks complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing. Truth claims are less easily validated now; desires to speak “for” others are suspect. The greater freedom to experience with textual form, however, does not guarantee a better product. The opportunities for writing worthy texts -- books and articles that are “good read” -- are multiple, exciting, and demanding. But the work is harder. The guarantees are fewer. There is a lot more for us to think about (1994: 523-524).

6. STUDYING NETWORK

As Vertovec (1999) points out, one of the central features of the analysis of transnational social formations are structures or systems of relationships best described as ‘networks.’ Manuel Castells has been vocal about studying transnational networks. He argues that current societies, which are characterized by the permeation of information technologies, are “fundamentally made of flows exchanges through network organizations and institutions” (1996:29). Network allows us to track and trace objects, meanings, images and ideas through different sets of interconnected nodes. In most cases, networks are informational and electronically organized. Unlike the bounded filed, network is considered an open and highly dynamic structure.

Conducting ethnography of network, however, has its own shortcomings. One could argue that this type of ethnography does not allow us to study the deep structures and hidden layers of meaning within a culture. Hence, the lack of intensive observation leads to what Geertz (1973) has called ‘thin description’ rather than ‘thick description.’ It is the latter that we, as anthropologists, should be concerned with and seek to achieve. Our primary task remains in how to probe for meanings of symbols, practices, and interactions.

7. ETHNOGRAPHY IN VIRTUAL SPACES

The recent remarkable advances in information-communication technology (ICT) have greatly contributed to introducing a new type of ethnography known as ‘cyberspace ethnography’ or ‘virtual ethnography.’ Kozinets (2002) has opted to call it “netnography,” which involves conducting ethnographic studies on the internet. Generally speaking, technological changes have affected social interactions and thus have reshaped our notion of community and communication. The internet, in particular, has become a ‘virtual home’ for millions of people. It is viewed as a social context in its own right; it delineates and transcends borders. Interest in the internet as a research site was initially inspired by work in technology studies and media studies. The shift we are witnessing in this regard is one from studying ‘real places’ to studying ‘virtual places,’ facilitated by computer-mediated communications.
Rheingold points out that virtual communities are “computer-mediated social groups” and “social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (1995:1-5). Online interactions and communications via E-mail, mailing lists, chat rooms, and news groups represent examples of this type of ethnography. Frischer remarks that:

Ethnographies of cyberspace need to deal in theory, time, place, language, and (cultures), institutions (legal, economic, psychological, scientific), and with reconfigured knowledge-power nexi involved in all of the above. They are challenged to do so both substantively and in their own forms and force of writing (1999: 247).

Within the same context, Wittel (2001) argues that ethnography in virtual spaces is considered the most radical attempt to move beyond the traditional fieldwork approach. It also poses some methodological problems. First, the accuracy of the data we collect is difficult to check. Internet user may not reveal her/his real identity, age, status, or gender. The internet is known as a medium of shifting identities and anonymous communications. Second, the scope of participant-observation is very limited. After all, the ethnographer does not observe or participate with “real” people who belong to “real” communities. Third, ethnography in virtual spaces lacks the context within which face-to-face interaction exists due to the physical distance between parties involved. This makes the ethnographer miss the opportunity to record or study additional layers of meaning such as the speech tone, body language, or facial expressions. To overcome these problems, the ethnographer needs to conduct detailed and systematic participation with the subjects being studied.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The recent transformations in ethnographic practice have de-fetishised the role of the method of participant-observation in the anthropological research. As Gupta and Ferguson claim “what would once have appeared as a logical impossibility- ethnography without the ethnos-has come to appear, to many, perfectly sensible, even necessary” (1997:2). Nevertheless, participant-observation continues to be an integral part of the anthropological methodology. It remains a distinctive feature and the backbone of the discipline of anthropology. Therefore, it should be highly stressed that the emergence of new forms of ethnography and new ethnographic methods does not, and should not, mean in any way the disappearance of the conventional ethnography or the print-based ethnographic writing.

The aforementioned shifts ought to be understood in relation to forces of globalisation and transnationalism, associated with late capitalism and postcolonialism, which have reshaped many of our conventional concepts, theories, and research methods. These forces have greatly problematized the conventional ways of conducting and writing ethnography. As has been discussed before, a central theme that has largely contributed to producing these shifts is the way we currently understand and study culture in general and the relationship between place and culture in particular. In this respect, Appadurai puts it concisely when he states:

The terms of the negotiation between imagined lives and deterritorialized worlds are complex, and they surely cannot be captured by the localizing strategies of traditional ethnography alone. What a new style of ethnography can do is to capture the impact of deterritorialization on the imaginative resources of lived, local experiences (1996: 52).

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