ONE

Discipline and Practice: “The Field” as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology

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I. INTRODUCTION

The practice of fieldwork, together with its associated genre, ethnography, has perhaps never been as central to the discipline of anthropology1 as it is today, in terms of both intellectual principles and professional practices. Intellectually, ethnography has long ceased to be conceived of as “mere description,” raw material for a natural science of human behavior. Whether via the literary turn (from “thick description” to “writing culture”) or the historic one (political economy and the turn to regional social history), mainstream social/cultural anthropology as practiced in leading departments in the United States and the United Kingdom2 has come to view ethnographic explication as a worthy and sufficient intellectual project in its own right. Indeed, it is striking that the generalist and comparativist theorists who dominated anthropology at midcentury (e.g., Radcliffe-Brown, Leslie White, and George Murdock) seem in the process of being mnemonically pruned from the anthropological family tree, while the work of those remembered as great fieldworkers (Malinowski, Boas, Evans-Pritchard, Leenhardt, etc.) continues to be much more widely discussed.

In terms of professional socialization and training, too, ethnographic fieldwork is at the core of what Stocking has called anthropology’s fundamental “methodological values”—“the taken-for-granted, pretheoretical notions of what it is to do anthropology (and to be an anthropologist)” (1992a: 282). As all graduate students in social/cultural anthropology know, it is fieldwork that makes one a “real anthropologist,” and truly anthropological knowledge is widely understood to be “based” (as we say) on fieldwork. Indeed, we would suggest that the single most significant factor determining whether a piece of research will be accepted as (that magical word) “anthropological” is the extent to which it depends on experience “in the field.”
Yet this idea of “the field,” although central to our intellectual and professional identities, remains a largely unexamined one in contemporary anthropology. The concept of culture has been vigorously critiqued and dissected in recent years (e.g., Wagner 1981; Clifford 1988; Rosaldo 1989a; Fox, ed., 1991); ethnography as a genre of writing has been made visible and critically analyzed (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1988); the dialogic encounters that constitute fieldwork experience have been explored (Crpanzano 1980; Rabinow 1977; Dumont 1978; Tedlock 1983); even the peculiar textual genre of fieldnotes has been subjected to reflection and analysis (Sanjek 1990). But what of “the field” itself, the place where the distinctive work of “fieldwork” may be done, that taken-for-granted space in which an “Other” culture or society lies waiting to be observed and written? This mysterious space—not the “what” of anthropology but the “where”—has been left to common sense, beyond and below the threshold of reflexivity.

It is astonishing, but true, that most leading departments of anthropology in the United States provide no formal (and very little informal) training in fieldwork methods—as few as 20 percent of departments, according to one survey. It is also true that most anthropological training programs provide little guidance in, and almost no critical reflection on, the selection of fieldwork sites and the considerations that deem some places but not others as suitable for the role of “the field.” It is as if the mystique of fieldwork were too great in anthropology for the profession even to permit such obvious and practical issues to be seriously discussed, let alone to allow the idea of “the field” itself to be subjected to scrutiny and reflection.

In turning a critical eye to such questions, our aim is not to breach what amounts to a collectively sanctioned silence simply for the pleasure of upsetting traditions. Rather, our effort to open up this subject is motivated by two specific imperatives.

The first imperative follows from the way the idea of “the field” functions in the micropolitical academic practices through which anthropological work is distinguished from work in related disciplines such as history, sociology, political science, literature and literary criticism, religious studies, and (especially) cultural studies. The difference between anthropology and these other disciplines, it would be widely agreed, lies less in the topics studied (which, after all, overlap substantially) than in the distinctive method anthropologists employ, namely fieldwork based on participant observation. In other words, our difference from other specialists in academic institutions is constructed not just on the premise that we are specialists in difference, but on a specific methodology for uncovering or understanding that difference. Fieldwork thus helps define anthropology as a discipline in both senses of the word, constructing a space of possibilities while at the same time drawing the lines that confine that space. Far from being a mere research technique, fieldwork has become “the basic constituting experience
both of anthropologists and of anthropological knowledge” (Stocking 1992a: 282).

Since fieldwork is increasingly the single constituent element of the anthropological tradition used to mark and police the boundaries of the discipline, it is impossible to rethink those boundaries or rework their contents without confronting the idea of “the field.” “The field” of anthropology and “the field” of “fieldwork” are thus politically and epistemologically intertwined; to think critically about one requires a readiness to question the other. Exploring the possibilities and limitations of the idea of “the field” thus carries with it the opportunity—or, depending on one’s point of view, the risk—of opening to question the meaning of our own professional and intellectual identities as anthropologists.

The second imperative for beginning to discuss the idea of “the field” in anthropology follows from a now widely expressed doubt about the adequacy of traditional ethnographic methods and concepts to the intellectual and political challenges of the contemporary postcolonial world. Concern about the lack of fit between the problems raised by a mobile, changing, globalizing world, on the one hand, and the resources provided by a method originally developed for studying supposedly small-scale societies, on the other, has of course been evident in anthropological circles for some time (see, for instance, Hymes 1972; Asad 1973). In recent years, however, questioning of the traditional fieldwork ideal has become both more widespread and more far-reaching. Some critics have pointed to problems in the construction of ethnographic texts (Clifford and Marcus 1986), some to the structures and practices through which relationships are established between ethnographers and their “informants” in the field (Crapanzano 1980; Dumont 1978; cf. Harrison, ed., 1991). Others have suggested that the problem lies as much in the fact that the world being described by ethnographers has changed dramatically without a corresponding shift in disciplinary practices since “fieldwork” became hegemonic in anthropology. Appadurai has posed the problem in the following terms:

As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic “projects,” the *ethno* in ethnography takes on a slipperiness, nonlocalized quality, to which the descriptive practices of anthropology will have to respond. The landscapes of group identity—the ethnoscapes—around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically self-conscious, or culturally homogeneous. . . . The task of ethnography now becomes the unraveling of a conundrum: what is the nature of locality, as a lived experience, in a globalized, deterritorialized world? (Appadurai 1991: 191, 196)

In what follows, we will further explore the challenge of coming to terms with the changed context of ethnographic work. For now, it is sufficient to
note a certain contradiction. On the one hand, anthropology appears determined to give up its old ideas of territorially fixed communities and stable, localized cultures, and to apprehend an interconnected world in which people, objects, and ideas are rapidly shifting and refuse to stay in place. At the same time, though, in a defensive response to challenges to its “turf” from other disciplines, anthropology has come to lean more heavily than ever on a methodological commitment to spend long periods in one localized setting. What are we to do with a discipline that loudly rejects received ideas of “the local,” even while ever more firmly insisting on a method that takes it for granted? A productive rethinking of such eminently practical problems in anthropological methodology, we suggest, will require a thoroughgoing reevaluation of the idea of the anthropological “field” itself, as well as the privileged status it occupies in the construction of anthropological knowledge.

This book therefore explores the idea of “the field” at each of the two levels described above. Some of the authors investigate how “the field” came to be part of the commonsense and professional practice of anthropology, and view this development in the contexts both of wider social and political developments and of the academy’s micropolitics. Other authors, researchers whose own work stretches the conventional boundaries of “fieldwork,” reflect on how the idea of “the field” has bounded and normalized the practice of anthropology—how it enables certain kinds of knowledge while blocking off others, authorizes some objects of study and methods of analysis while excluding others; how, in short, the idea of “the field” helps to define and patrol the boundaries of what is often knowingly referred to as “real anthropology.”

In the remaining sections of this chapter, we develop some general observations about how the idea of “the field” has been historically constructed and constituted in anthropology (Part II) and trace some key effects and consequences of this dominant concept of “the field” for professional and intellectual practices (Part III). We want not only to describe the configurations of field and discipline that have prevailed in the past but also to help rework these configurations to meet the needs of the present and the future better. “The field” is a (arguably the) central component of the anthropological tradition, to be sure; but anthropology also teaches that traditions are always reworked and even reinvented as needed. With this in mind, we search (in Part IV) for intellectual resources and alternative disciplinary practices that might aid in such a reconstruction of tradition, which we provisionally locate both in certain forgotten and devalued elements of the anthropological past and in various marginalized sites on the geographical and disciplinary peripheries of anthropology. Finally, in Part V, we propose a re-
formulation of the anthropological fieldwork tradition that would decenter and defetishize the concept of “the field,” while developing methodological and epistemological strategies that foreground questions of location, intervention, and the construction of situated knowledges.

Whether anthropology ought to have a unique or distinctive approach that sets it apart from other disciplines is not a question of great intrinsic interest to us. Certainly, there are many more interesting questions to ask about any given piece of work than whether or not it “belongs” within anthropology. But we accept James Clifford’s point (chapter 10 in this book) that as long as the current configuration of disciplines obtains, the slot labeled “anthropology” will be obliged, in one way or another, to distinguish and justify itself. We agree, too, that the anthropological “trademark” of fieldwork seems certain to be central to any such disciplinary strategies of self-definition and legitimation, at least in the near future. With this in mind, it seems most useful to us to attempt to redefine the fieldwork “trademark” not with a time-honored commitment to the local but with an attentiveness to social, cultural, and political location and a willingness to work self-consciously at shifting or realigning our own location while building epistemological and political links with other locations (an idea that we develop in Part V). Such “location-work,” we suggest, is central to many of the most innovative reconceptualizations of anthropological fieldwork practices in recent years, some of which are illustrated in this book. The fact that such work fits only uneasily within the traditional disciplinary bounds of a “real anthropology” defined by “real fieldwork” has caused a good many recent tensions within the discipline. A serious consideration of what the conventional anthropological commitment to “field” and “fieldwork” entails, and a willingness to rethink how such a commitment might be conceptualized, could contribute to a better understanding of such tensions and ways in which they might be addressed constructively.

II. GENEALOgy OF A “FIELD SCIENCE”

Anyone who has done fieldwork, or studied the phenomenon, knows that one does not just wander onto a “field site” to engage in a deep and meaningful relationship with “the natives.” “The field” is a clearing whose deceptive transparency obscures the complex processes that go into constructing it. In fact, it is a highly overdetermined setting for the discovery of difference. To begin with, it is the prior conceptual segmentation of the world into different cultures, areas, and sites that makes the enterprise of fieldwork possible. How does this territorialization take place? Through what conventions and inherited assumptions is it possible for the world to appear, through the anthropological lens, as an array of field sites?
Natural History and the Malinowskian “Field”

One place to begin thinking about these questions is to note how the idea of “the field” entered the discipline. We do not aim here to construct a full intellectual history of the idea of “the field,” nor do we possess the historiographical expertise to do so, though scholars of the history of anthropology such as George Stocking (ed., 1983, 1991, 1992a), Henrika Kuklick (1991, and chapter 2 of this book), and Joan Vincent (1990) have already made important contributions toward that task. Instead, we wish to raise, in a genealogical spirit, a more restricted and focused set of questions about the key relationships that led to the constitution of anthropology as a field of knowledge that depends on fieldwork as the distinctive mode of gathering knowledge.6

In this spirit, it is interesting to note that the term fieldwork, apparently introduced into anthropology by the former zoologist A. C. Haddon, was derived from the discourse of field naturalists (Stocking 1992a; Kuklick, chapter 2). As Stocking observes, Haddon conceived his first fieldwork in the Torres Straits squarely within the terms of natural history: “to study the fauna, the structure, and the mode of formation of coral reefs” (1992a: 21). Indeed, Kuklick (chapter 2) vividly demonstrates that the anthropological “discovery” of fieldwork needs to be set in the context of a more general set of transformations in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century practices of all naturalists. Like other “field sciences,” such as zoology, botany, and geology, anthropology at the start of the century found both its distinctive object and its distinctive method in “the detailed study of limited areas” (Kuklick, chapter 2; cf. Stocking 1992a). Anthropology’s origin as a naturalistic science of the early human is therefore closely tied to the eventual role of fieldwork as its dominant disciplinary practice. To do fieldwork was, in the beginning, to engage in a branch of natural history; the object to be studied, both intensively and in a limited area, was primitive humanity in its natural state.7

Many early twentieth-century fieldworkers explicitly recognized, of course, that their subjects were in fact not living in a pristine, “natural” condition; so-called “salvage anthropology” was a self-conscious attempt to reconstruct such a state from the observation and questioning of natives living under the patently “unnatural” conditions of a postconquest colonial world. David Tomas (1991) shows, for example, how Radcliffe-Brown complained that the informants he met on a penal settlement (established by the colonial government in the Andaman Islands to imprison those who rose against it in the Great Indian Mutiny of 1857) no longer remembered “the things of the old time”; he therefore tried to interview others who “do not know a single word of any language but their own” (in Tomas 1991: 96). His eventual plan was to go to the Nicobars where the data were less likely to be contaminated
by the natives’ previous contact with white people like himself (Tomas 1991: 95–96). The early Boasians in the United States faced similar difficulties in seeking to build comprehensive descriptions of peoples and societies that had been substantially decimated by conquest, genocide, and disease.

With the Malinowskian revolution in fieldwork, anthropological naturalism came to be asserted in an even stronger form. Through an active forgetting of conquest and colonialism, fieldworkers increasingly claimed not simply to reconstruct the natural state of the primitive, but to observe it directly. Thus did social anthropology become defined as “the study of small-scale society—ahistorical, ethno-graphic, and comparative,” with extended participant observation its distinctive method (Vincent 1991: 55). Yet it is worth remembering just how late a development this was. It is not only that, as Kuklick shows (chapter 2), the gentlemen-scholars of the nineteenth century scorned the idea of actually going to “the field” (regarding the “collection” of data as a task for unskilled and low-status workers—in some places, for slaves). For even after the Trobriand Islanders provided anthropology with its mythic fieldwork charter, many of Malinowski’s own students (according to George Stocking, personal communication, 10 November 1993) did library dissertations before ever going into “the field,” as did their Boasian contemporaries (and, indeed, Malinowski himself). As Stocking has shown, it was Malinowski’s ambition and “entrepreneurial talent,” rather than simply the intrinsic intellectual merits of his program, that enabled him to secure the support of the Rockefeller Foundation for his vision of anthropology, which only then (i.e., after 1930) enabled him to institutionalize his perspective. (For example, all Rockefeller-funded fieldworkers of the International African Institute were required to spend a year in Malinowski’s seminar [Stocking 1992a]). Malinowski’s success in normalizing “his method” may have owed more to his institutional skills and to the leaving of progeny who continued his legacy than to anything inherent in extended participant observation itself (cf. Kuklick 1991; Vincent 1990).

A key result of the Malinowskian triumph, however, was that a naturalistic ideal that had been dismissed as impractical in the actual fieldwork of such founding fathers as Radcliffe-Brown and Boas came to be retrospectively asserted as the discipline’s foundational methodological strategy. Fieldwork in sociocultural anthropology in this way came to share with fields such as primatology the requirement that its subjects be directly observed in their natural surroundings (see Haraway 1989). Those living outside their native state (for example, Native Americans working in towns; Aborigines employed on ranches; or, in Radcliffe-Brown’s case cited above, prisoners forcibly held in a penal settlement) came to be considered less suitable anthropological objects because they were outside “the field,” just as zoological studies of animals in captivity came to be considered inferior to those conducted on animals in the wild. The naturalistic genre of ethnography was an attempt to
recreate that natural state textually, just as the dioramas painstakingly constructed in natural history museums aimed not only to describe but also to recreate the natural surroundings of primates and other animals (Haraway 1989: 26–58). Thus, when Ulf Hannerz (1986) complained that ethnography was still obsessed with “the most other of others,” he was critiquing a long-standing ethnographic attitude that those most Other, and most isolated from “ourselves,” are those most authentically rooted in their “natural” settings (cf. Malkki 1992).

This conception, of course, was and is undergirded by the metaphor of the “field” to denote the sites where anthropologists do their research. The word field connotes a place set apart from the urban—opposed not so much to the transnational metropolises of late capitalism as to the industrial cities of the era of competitive capitalism, as befits the word’s period of origin (Fox 1991b). Going to the “field” suggests a trip to a place that is agrarian, pastoral, or maybe even “wild”; it implies a place that is perhaps cultivated (a site of culture), but that certainly does not stray too far from nature. What stands metaphorically opposed to work in the field is work in industrial places: in labs, in offices, in factories, in urban settings—in short, in civilized spaces that have lost their connection with nature. As a metaphor we work by, “the field” thus reveals many of the unspoken assumptions of anthropology. This is not, of course, to say that anthropologists do not work in industrial or urban settings, or that they do not call those sites “fields”—we are not being literalist, merely noting that it is not just coincidence that pastoral and agrarian metaphors shepherd anthropologists in their daily tasks.9

Areas and Sites

Anthropology, more than perhaps any other discipline, is a body of knowledge constructed on regional specialization, and it is within regionally circumscribed epistemic communities that many of the discipline’s key concepts and debates have been developed (Fardon 1990; Appadurai 1988b). More than comparatists in other fields—political science, sociology, literature, history, law, religion, and business—anthropologists combine language learning and regional scholarship with long-term residence in “the field.” Regional expertise is thus built into the anthropological project, constituting the other face of a discipline (at least implicitly) predicated on cultural comparison (Marcus and Fischer 1986). As we have argued elsewhere (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997), it is precisely the naturalization of cultural difference as inhering in different geographical locales that makes anthropology such a regional science. From this, too, there follows the built-in necessity of travel: one can only encounter difference by going elsewhere, by going to “the field.”

It is possible to situate “the field” more precisely as a site constructed through the shifting entanglements of anthropological notions of “culture
areas,” the institutional politics of “area studies,” and the global order of nation-states. The notion of culture areas, supplemented by ideas such as peoplehood and ethnicity (e.g., “the Kurds”), religion (e.g., “the Islamic world”), language (e.g., “Bantu-speaking Africa”), and race (e.g., “Melanesia” [see Thomas 1989a] or “Black Africa” [see Amory chapter 5]), attempted to relate a set of societies with common traits to each other. Thus the Mediterranean with its honor-and-shame complex constituted one culture area (Herzfeld 1987; Passaro chapter 8), while South Asia with the institution of caste hierarchy formed another (Appadurai 1988b), and Polynesia with its centralized chiefdoms constituted a third (Thomas 1989a). Although we anthropologists devote far less attention today to mapping “culture regions” than we used to (e.g., Wissler 1923; Murdock 1967; but cf. Burton et al. 1996), the culture area remains a central disciplinary concept that implicitly structures the way in which we make connections between the particular groups of people we study and the groups that other ethnographers study (cf. Fardon 1990; Thomas 1989a).

However, and this is where issues become more complicated, ideas about culture areas in the anthropological literature are refracted, altered, and sometimes undermined by the institutional mechanisms that provide the intellectual legitimacy and financial support for doing fieldwork. To take but one example, the setting up of area studies centers in American universities has long been underwritten by the U.S. government. The definition of areas, the emphasis placed on various activities, and the importance of particular topics as research priorities have mostly been thinly disguised (if that) projections of the state’s strategic and geopolitical priorities. As the state’s interests shift, so do funding priorities and the definition of areas themselves. A few years ago, for instance, there was an effort to carve out a new area, “Inner Asia,” which would be distinct from Eastern Europe and Soviet studies on the one hand, and the Middle East and China on the other. The timing of this development remains mysterious unless one understands the concern with the war in Afghanistan and the fear of the possible ascendance of “Islamic republics” in the regions adjacent to what was then the Soviet Union.

As the institutional mechanisms that define areas, fund research, and support scholarship change, they intersect in complicated ways with changing ideas about “culture areas” to produce “fields” that are available for research. Thus, no major funding agency supports research on “the Mediterranean” or “the Caribbean.” Some parts of the Mediterranean culture area are funded by European area studies and the others by Middle Eastern area studies. The more culturally exotic and geopolitically embattled parts thus become proper “anthropological” field sites, whereas Western Europe (which, besides having “less culture” [cf. Rosaldo 1988], is part of NATO) is a less appropriate “field,” as the many Europeanists who struggle to find jobs in anthropology departments can attest.
Similarly, anthropological ideas about culture areas and geographical specializations have been transformed by their encounter with the rude realities of decolonization. For instance, anthropologists working in Africa today normally construct their regional specializations in national terms that would have made no sense prior to the 1960s. Thus Victor Turner was not, as he would be styled today, a “Zambianist” but an “Africanist”; his *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* was “A Study of Ndembu Village Life,” and the reader would have to comb the text with some care to find out that the study was in fact conducted in what was then northern Rhodesia. Evans-Pritchard’s research freely crossed between the Belgian Congo (Azande), the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (Nuer), and British East Africa (Luo); his regional specialization was not defined by such political territorializations. Yet just as Evans-Pritchard’s work was enabled by the brute fact of colonial conquest, so, too, the field sites in which contemporary anthropologists work are shaped by the geopolitics of the postcolonial, imperial world. Decolonization has transformed field sites not merely by making it difficult, if not impossible, to move across national borders, but by affecting a whole host of mechanisms, from the location of archives to the granting of visas and research clearance. The institutions that organized knowledge along colonial lines have yielded to ones that organize it along national ones.

A “good” field site is made, however, not only by considerations of funding and clearance, but by its suitability for addressing issues and debates that matter to the discipline. As Jane Collier shows (chapter 6), the idea of substantive “subfields” such as “legal anthropology,” “economic anthropology,” “psychological anthropology,” and so on was until recently a key device through which such issues and debates were constituted. The problematics and conventions of such subfields helped to shape not only the topic of investigation, but also the conception of the field site itself, in a number of ways. First, as we have noted, culture areas have long been linked to subject areas; thus India, with its ideologies of caste and purity, was long taken to be an especially good site for an anthropologist of religion (Appadurai 1988b), and Africa (with its segmentary lineages) was thought ideal for the political anthropologist, just as Melanesia (with its elaborate systems of exchange) invited economic anthropologists (cf. Fardon 1990). But subfields have also carried more specific assumptions about fieldwork and methodology. The “fieldwork” of a legal anthropologist, for instance, might be expected to include the examination of written court records, while that of a psychological anthropologist working in the same area likely would not; in this manner, different subfields could construct the site to be studied in different ways. As Collier shows, however, the very idea of coherent “subfields” has broken down in recent years. The growing willingness to question received ideas of “field” and “fieldwork” may well be related to the recent decline of the well-defined subfields that once helped to define and bound field sites.