

Introduction

I left Chicago two days after the assassination of Robert Kennedy. My apartment in Chicago was practically bare. I had finished packing and had sold most of my furniture, leaving only the bed and a coffeepot. I had been mildly anxious about leaving, but the news of the murder had buried those feelings under a wave of revulsion and disgust. I left America with a sense of giddy release. I was sick of being a student, tired of the city, and felt politically impotent. I was going to Morocco to become an anthropologist.

I arrived in Paris in June of 1968, several days after police had cleared the last students from the faculty of medicine. In the wake of the uprising I found the streets nearly empty, and ripped-up walls covered with political graffiti. I attended several meetings in the courtyard of the Sorbonne, but it was too late, the revolutionary momentum had crested. Leaflets urged people not to leave Paris for their vacations. The capital was empty, broken, worn. I met a girl—part Indian, she said—who was running away from her home in Arizona. As we wandered by the Seine, the war-like atmosphere and uncertain future made me feel like a character in one of Sartre's novels, very existential. Two days later I had my hair cut, took the bus to Orly, and left for Morocco.

In the early 1960s the great Hutchins experiment in general education was in its last stages at the University of Chicago. Knowing that liberal education in its "classic" sense was dying out moved me deeply. The college had offered me the profound and liberating experience of discovering what thinking is really about, but it had also left me with a sense of crisis about the older sciences and disciplines. For most of us, it was slowly becoming clear that American society was beset with profound structural problems, and that the illumination and coherence necessary to overcome them would not be found in the academy or in existing political institutions. This left many of us searching and confused, but still relatively passive. The troubles ran deep, but Chicago was serene on the surface.

Perhaps the two books which expressed the ethos of that time most fully for me were Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) and Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* (1955). Kuhn had clearly isolated a set of concerns which extended beyond physics and chemistry. His term "paradigm exhaustion" symbolized the failure of conventional thinking to explain the common theme in our dissatisfactions with the academic curriculum, politics, and personal experience. Somehow, the received truths offered to us were not sufficient to organize our perceptions and experiences; something new must lie ahead.

My attraction to Lévi-Strauss's concept of *dépaysement* separated me from many of my friends, who were more enticed by the emerging varieties of social and political praxis. The Frenchman's paradoxical call for a distancing that would allow one to return

more profoundly home was compelling, if obscure. I was weary of the West, without knowing why, and was seduced by the simplistic view that Western culture was only one among many, and not the most "interesting" one at that.

This undergraduate ennui plus my fervent intellectual bent had drawn me to anthropology. It seemed to be the only academic discipline where, by definition, one had to get out of the library and away from other academics. Its scope was truly preposterous, literally anything from lemur feet to shadow plays; as one professor put it, it was "the dilettante's discipline."

In the graduate anthropology department at the University of Chicago, the world was divided into two categories of people: those who had done fieldwork, and those who had not; the latter were not "really" anthropologists, regardless of what they knew about anthropological topics. Professor Mircea Eliade, for example, was a man of great erudition in the field of comparative religion, and was respected for his encyclopedic learning, but it was repeatedly stressed that he was not an anthropologist: his intuition had not been altered by the alchemy of fieldwork.

I was told that my papers did not really count because once I had done fieldwork they would be radically different. Knowing smiles greeted the acerbic remarks which graduate students made about the lack of theory in certain of the classics we studied; never mind, we were told, the authors were great fieldworkers. At the time, this intrigued me. The promise of initiation into the clan secrets was seductive. I fully accepted the dogma.

Yet I knew of no book which made a serious intellectual effort to define this essential rite of passage, this metaphysical marker which separated anthropologists from the rest. Undoubtedly the one great exception to this intriguing rule was Lévi-Strauss' masterpiece, *Tristes Tropiques*. Still, as everyone knew, Lévi-Strauss was not a good fieldworker. The book was treated by anthropologists either as a fine piece of French literature or, snidely and true to form, as an overcompensation for the author's shortcomings in the bush.

I have asked leading anthropologists who espouse this "before and after" view of fieldwork why they have not written on the subject themselves, since it seems to be such an important one for the field. The response I received was culturally standardized: "Yes, I suppose, I thought about it when I was young. I kept diaries, perhaps someday, but you know there are really other things which are more important."

This book is an account of my experiences in Morocco; it is also an essay about anthropology. I have tried to break through the double-bind which has defined anthropology in the past. As graduate students we are told that "anthropology equals experience"; you are not an anthropologist until you have the experience of doing it. But when one returns from the field, the opposite immediately applies: anthropology is not the experiences which made you an initiate, but only the objective data you have brought back.

One can let off steam by writing memoirs or anecdotal accounts of sufferings, but under no circumstances is there any direct relation between field

activity and the theories which lie at the core of the discipline. In recent years there has been a minor flurry of books dealing with the question of participant observation. These books have varied a great deal in keenness of perception and grace of style, but they all cling to the key assumption that the field experience itself is basically separable from the mainstream of theory in anthropology—that the enterprise of inquiry is essentially discontinuous from its results.

At the risk of violating the clan taboos, I argue that all cultural activity is experiential, that fieldwork is a distinctive type of cultural activity, and that it is this activity which defines the discipline. But what should therefore be the very strength of anthropology—its experiential, reflective, and critical activity—has been eliminated as a valid area of inquiry by an attachment to a positivistic view of science, which I find radically inappropriate in a field which claims to study humanity.

The problem of the book is a hermeneutical one, and the method I employ is a modified phenomenological one. I have striven to keep the use of technical terms and jargon to an absolute minimum, but it seems only fair to give some signposts for the path I have attempted to travel. Thus, following Paul Ricoeur, I define the problem of hermeneutics (which is simply Greek for “interpretation”) as “the comprehension of self by the detour of the comprehension of the other.”* It is vital to stress that this is not psychology of any sort, despite the definite

*Paul Ricoeur, “Existence et herméneutique,” p. 20, in *Le Conflit des Interprétations* (Editions Du Seuil, Paris, 1969).

psychological overtones in certain passages. The self being discussed is perfectly public, it is neither the purely cerebral cogito of the Cartesians, nor the deep psychological self of the Freudians. Rather it is the culturally mediated and historically situated self which finds itself in a continuously changing world of meaning.

For that reason I employ a phenomenological method. Ricoeur again offers us a clear definition. Phenomenology for him is a description of "a movement in which each cultural figure finds its meaning not in what precedes it but in what follows: consciousness is drawn out of itself and ahead of itself in a process in which each step is abolished and retained in the following one."* In simpler language, this means that what you will read in this book is meant to be a whole, in which the meaning of each chapter depends on what comes after it. What the book and these experiences are about is themselves.

The book is a reconstruction of a set of encounters that occurred while doing fieldwork. At that time, of course, things were anything but neat and coherent. At this time, I have made them seem that way so as to salvage some meaning from that period for myself and for others. This book is a studied condensation of a swirl of people, places, and feelings. It could have been half as long, or twice as long, or ten times as long. Some informants with whom I worked are not mentioned, some are collapsed into the figures presented here, and others are left out altogether. Anyone who had such a set of progressively coherent

**Ibid.*, p. 25.

encounters while in the field, and was fully conscious of it at the time, would not have the kind of experience which I have reconstructed here. As Hegel says, "the owl of Minerva flies at Dusk."

What follows is an account, reconstructed five years later and again two years after that, of my fieldwork experience in Morocco during 1968 and 1969. I worked in Morocco under the guidance of my advisor, Clifford Geertz, who, along with his wife Hildred and two other young anthropologists, was studying a walled oasis market town, Sefrou. My task was to work in the tribal areas surrounding Sefrou in the Middle Atlas Mountains of Morocco.*

*For a complementary and more traditionally anthropological treatment of the data covered here, see my *Symbolic Domination: Cultural Form and Historical Change in Morocco* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1975).