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Words for the Other. Ethnographies of Diversity

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Abstract

This article wishes to address ways in which cultural difference is perceived and described by the social sciences, in particular in ethnographical texts. The western view of the Other began to undergo change around the second half of the twentieth century. From the nineteen seventies on, some of the cultural movements that emerged began accusing ethnographical studies of ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism, and, thus, sought new ways of representing different cultures. The most representative post-modernist approaches of the nineteen eighties and nineties – auto-ethnography and performance ethnography – present both advantages and limitations which we shall examine here. The most relevant contribution, perhaps, made during those decades of research, was the self-reflexive technique, which multiplies the points of view presented in an ethnographical text. It is not by mere chance that analytic ethnography has taken on board reflexivity as a valuable method, freeing it of postmodern presuppositions. The latest developments regarding the dialogue with the Other should be sought in the ethnographies of globalisation, which, by refusing the ethnocentric enthusiasm resulting from increases in connections and mobility– shifting the focus of the representation of the Other onto the plane of research – study the critical and perverse effects of globalisation on marginalised cultures.

Describing the foreigner

Georg Simmel's reflections on the condition of the foreigner remind us of what our life experience teaches us, that is, that what is identical reassures, while what is different generates fear (Simmel, 1989). Communities consider foreigners a threat and do not attribute them the positive role which they actually play: they bestow cohesion on the social body, which aggregates against diversity (Cardano 1997); they set inert, decaying situations in motion by provoking social change (Donati, 2008); they assume roles the community refused as impure or despicable. They are indispensable and yet they are the object of taboos, around which the community constructs images, ideologies, narratives, definitions and words that label them as dangerous (Ferry, 1999; Lindón, 2005). Fear of the Other is deeply rooted in the collective psyche but, in complex societies, it is bound up with a sense of bewilderment deriving from "liquidity", both as far as the realistic assessment of the dangers and the availability of remedies (Bauman, 2008) are concerned. This state of constant uncertainty triggers off unconscious mechanisms of anger and aggressiveness which, once they emerge, are rationalised through ideological, socio-political rhetoric. Nationalism, secessionism and ethnic cleansing always appeal to fanciful archetypical mythologies. The rhetoric of fear produces descriptions of the Other, vitiated by bias and ethnocentrism. Descriptions are applied to the bodies of foreigners like labels on deviance. The theory of labelling (Tannenbaum, 1938; Becker, 1963) acts also at unconscious level, it modifies the self-image of those who are targeted, it conditions definitions of the situations they experience. Labelling the Other is tantamount to telling a story in which the foreigner is portrayed as the stigmatised loser. But, through the individuals involved, it is really culture that is judged and penalised. Societies define and represent foreign cultures according to models determined by history and sociology. Therefore,

the role of language in the social sciences is crucial. Sociological descriptions of inter-cultural realities are capable of interacting with collective dynamics. Sociological discourse can influence the definitions and images that are conveyed within social networks, because it is no longer confined to academic and specialist circles, but is free to circulate and be inflated by the contamination of public utterance (for example, at media level). Awareness of this kind of linguistic and conceptual power, common today within the social sciences, is rooted in the cultural turn of the nineteen sixties and seventies, which has been defined in many ways (*rhetoric turn, literary turn, textual turn*) and is associated with the fact that sociology places the accent upon the importance of the words used to describe the Other.

The discovery of the Other

Michel Foucault, with his analysis of the regimes of truth (1971), and Jacques Derrida (1971) with deconstructionism, showed up the anything but innocent conventional terms and metaphors capable of polluting scientific writing, and showed how such rhetorical artifices can become the linguistic vehicles of power. Anthropologists and sociologists have begun to analyse (deconstruct) their own knowledge, putting on trial as it were, the concepts constructed by anthropology and sociology and availed of to describe the Other, recognising their underscoring ideological pre-comprehensions, that is, the ethnocentrism of western studies that focus on subjects who represent other cultures.

With Clifford Geertz's interpretative anthropology (1987) the *crisis of representation* becomes explicit, and questions even what happens upstream of writing¹, as far as relations between the in-field ethnographer and informant are concerned. It is here that the language which will comprise the scientific text as a final account of the research, is drawn up. Geertz opts for an interpretative position with regards the culture of the other: he tries to textualise the meanings that stem from the interaction with the natives in a dense, multiple and detailed description, the aim of which is reciprocity of interpretation. Seeing that, for Geertz, ethnographical description hides/reveals power relations, it is also a tool capable of providing the reader with a representation of the self and the Other, as close as possible, not so much to the objective reality, as to the reality of the experiences of the two poles engaged in the observational rapport: the ethnographer and the informant. The words used to describe the Other, according to Geertz, are the result of interaction in the field. Starting with Geertz a season of experiments, in the ambit both of the observational relationship and the public delivery of the results, begins.

In the nineteen eighties, as post-modern sensitivity spread², the *Writing Culture* movement, promoted by George Marcus and James Clifford (2001), began to place the question of power at the heart of criticism. Even Geertz, who was among the first to denounce the contradictions of the ethnographical authorities, began to be seen as a manipulator, no different from the traditional ethnographers. The interpretative method proposed by him left the power and the control of the writing ethnographer, over the translation and the language used to define the Other, unaltered. The hermeneutic circle appeared as a falsely democratic solution, because, it was, in actual fact, all at the discretion of the author, and confirmed once more the superiority of western identity. The point

1 Our viewpoint shifts continually as a response to our changes mind and mood, the context within urges us to narrate ourselves, as well as the addressee of the tale. Furthermore, media formats and literary models which nurtured us influence the forms within which we tell our story, the words we use, the emptions we allow to surface and those we suppress (Gergen & Gergen 1987). The linguistic power of the observer, deriving from his/her different culture, is born *upstream of the text*. An essay is a complex result built on the bases of partial written pluralities (fieldnotes, theoretical and methodological notes, memories). It is with these texts that the researcher begins to construct his/her concepts, the theoretical building-blocks used to interpret the phenomena he/she has observed. The ways in which the words of the Other are constructed stem from in-field ethnographical practices and the impact descriptions and initial definitions have on the future development of the scholarly text.

2 Postmodernism – which coincides in part with post-structuralism – is a philosophical stance creating opposition to (or extreme development of) the modern (meaning the centrality of the rational and systemic). During the second half of the 1970's, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault during his later period, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard distanced themselves from the structuralists of the 1950's, by opposing open to closed form, absence to presence, signifier to signified, irony to metaphysics, anti-narrative to narrative, anarchy to hierarchy. In the social sciences postmodernism acts as the philosophical backdrop research practices aimed at equal involvement of researchers and actors thanks to techniques based on subjectivity, evocation and self-reflexivity.

of observation remained ethnocentric. According to the two authors, the regime of the political dominion and of the west on the “ethnographical east” has, by now, become intolerable. The era of colonial writing – where it is We who explain Them – has been replaced by postcolonialism and “crossed glances”. Writings by social scientists of non-western origin have begun to vivisection western lifestyles, giving rise to other narrations which mark an toppling of relations, in the field and in texts: the westerners change from being the observers to being the observed (Rosaldo, 2001; Talal Asad, 2003).

The consequences of the post-modern paradigm regarding ethnographical research are visible in much experimental research, from the nineteen eighties to the present day, where the ethnographers question themselves about possible ways of re-describing the Other as well as constructing a non-polluted vocabulary. How can we truly give voice to the Other? How can we produce descriptions and definitions respectful of diversity?

Vocabularies of diversity: postmodern ethnography

New ethnography – which intends overturning tradition and therefore pursues a critical vocation– seeks in postmodernism the lexis and the instruments required for the production of polyphonic texts, where the social subjects may express the plurality of the points of view present in the field. With this new aim in mind, the new levers available in the ethnographer’s toolbox are: attention towards the subjectivity of the researcher, dialogue with the social subjects, creativity in the manner of communicating research results. Subjectivity and dialogue are the principal components of reflexivity, which consist in the researcher’s ability to self-observe when negotiating with interviewees (Manoukian, 1998), pinpointing relations and exchanges of an emotional as well as of a cultural nature, and without concealing errors and accidents both of a personal and of a theoretical-methodological kind (Ceserani 2010). Ethnographers accept revealing their own vulnerability, and renounce the pretentious status of omniscient author, while placing themselves upon the same plane as the other social actors. The objective third person observer is replaced by a first-person narrating voice, portrayed as one of the characters participating subjectively in the research story as a persona engaging in a relationship with the Other.

Auto-ethnography³ – which pre-existed postmodernism but was valorised by it – disposes of a vast range of techniques and definitions (Chawla, 2007), which converge to express the need for self-discovery, in a context where the Other acts as mirror (Krieger, 1991; Ellis, 2004; Shaffir, 1999). It is, perhaps, the form of ethnography which best embodies the aims and methods of post-modern ethnography, as it explores more thoroughly the potentialities of reflexivity (Adams, Ellis & Bochner, 2011; Alsop, 2002; Melucci, 1998), in particular as an effort to empathise with Others and enter into contact with their most profound truths, while, at the same time, self-observing the ethnographer’s own reactions. This occurs because, auto-ethnography, in the strictest sense, concerns ethnographers who do not go into a field they consider exotic or foreign but, into an ambit, which due to a series of circumstances, brings them into contact with an environment the details of which are known to them, a context quite familiar to them; a context that is, however, considered exceptional or eccentric compared to social “normality”. In actual fact, auto-ethnography may be ethnic, when natives who have become ethnographers describe from within the culture of the origins; it may also regard critical moments, like grave illness or strong existential discomfort. Ethnographers, in this latter case, are not outsiders seeking involvement with interviewees in order become acquainted with the cultural practices and constructs of others, but they are the effective members of a group with which they share certain strongly marked conditions. Their discourse about/with themselves and about/with the Other tends to coincide,

³ The autoethnographical choice is a specific kind of investigation which, at times, coincides with the protagonism of the sociologist, as in the *personal essay* by Phillip Lopate (1995). At times it tends towards intimism, as in the "Chicago 1940" case (Richardson, 2000), where recollections of banal childhood events act as a mirror to chunks of urban life, of ethnic or family relationships. On other occasions, it enters into the complex mechanisms of research and reveals its more opaque operative phases (Simpson, 1996). From a stylistic point of view, the outcome is a text full of self-awareness, where the researcher may be the protagonist of or a secondary character in the research narrative (Buzzanell, 1994).

while their chief task remains that of assuming a distance such as to permit them to interpret the situation as a social fact. There is no doubt that the words they will choose to describe the phenomenon will be more adherent and insightful, as well as being shared by the others.

As to the issue of conveying research results, postmodern ethnography has explored many areas regarding writing and communication, looking for ways of representing the Other more authentic and incisive than those of the classical monographic method. Several ethnographers actually include their interviewees and informants physically in their accounts, availing of what is known as performance ethnography, which makes use of devices belonging to the theatrical and figurative arts (Landy, 1996; Mullen & Finley, 2003; Oberg, 2008) and they convey the results of their research as plays (Tedlock, 2000; Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997), multimedial shows and visual narratives (Harper, 1982). In a form lying somewhere between social theatre and theatrical sociology, performance ethnography provides sociological discourse with a kind of physical description of the Other. The social subjects are invited to deconstruct their roles, and, later, stage their drama, representing the social action focused on by the research project. The actors' narration is negotiated by the ethnographer and concludes with the creation of a mutually agreed script and a performance which may take the form of a veritable play with professional actors (Ellis & Bochner 2000). These "extreme" communications techniques aim at intercepting the authenticity of the Other and, when effective, they manage to grasp the ambiguity and the ploys that quests for "truth" contain.

An exemplary case that sums up all the identity parameters of postmodern ethnography is the interactive play regarding Nigerian culture by Joni L. Jones *Searching for Osun* (2002). Jones's work is an example of ethnic auto-ethnography in the theatrical form. It is an instance of auto-ethnography because the authoress provides an account of herself in relation to her own culture, and explores its contradictions availing of a sociological tool. At the same time Professor Jones's work is a theatrical representation intended as an exchange between different identities while providing a reflection on cultural authenticity. The style is reflexive because the authoress includes her own subjectivity in the performance, telling her story and continually re-defining her identity in an on-going dialogue with the audience, which is also allowed to have its say⁴. The rules of performance ethnography are still being defined, but Jones codifies her own. The performance must be the direct outcome of an observational report, which brings to the stage the quality of in-field work and the relationship with the informant. It must centre on an idea, on a conceptual focus which is not simply "you are here". The idea is the context of the performance: for example, "Searching for Osun" does not merely mean representing Nigerian culture vaguely, but involves investigating the religious identity of an Afro-American in relation to her place of origin. Professor Jones asks herself what Osun may mean to a present-day American Nigerian. In order to be efficacious, the performance must stem from collaboration between the ethnographer and the community being studied, in a form which also brings to the surface the subjectivity of the ethnographer, who must address the manner in which she has interpreted the culture she has studied. Above all, she must manage to bring to the audience a plurality of voices, by including in the performance many diverging opinions and inviting the audience too to express its views. Finally, there must be a performance ethic which favours dialogue rather than display. The performance of *Searching for Osun*, a Yoruba divinity, is a re-visitation of one of Nigeria's traditional religious cults, perceived by Nigerian Americans as a truth underscoring their origins, as a form of authenticity to be sought in order to find themselves. The religious cult is a total social event, it implies dressing up, dancing, eating and telling. All of the elements required are provided by the authoress, following Victor Turner's methodology, in stands acting as the scenes where the audience is invited to participate, by eating, wearing ethnic dress, dancing, telling stories. She sets up a kind of living, itinerant museum which permits Nigerians, naturalised in the United States, to

⁴ Many have criticised Crapanzano's way of "giving voice" to Tuhami. In Italy, Irene Maffi emphasised the "exotic" forcing used to portray both Tuhami's living conditions, and the spatio-temporal categories used to incardinate his life history (Maffi, 2001).

experience aspects of the culture of their origins. The added asset of this technique lies in its ability to provide a total experience – cognitive, emotional and physical– concerning the real difference between the Yoruba of present-day Africa, and the way this culture has been transformed and contaminated in America. The staging of the cult of Osun out of context - the Yoruba cults exported to America have given rise to popular practices like *lucumi*, *santeria* and *voodun* - highlights the strident contrast existing between the Nigerian-American and the original African cultures, perceived as more authentic. It becomes clear that Africa has become a myth for Afro-Americans, one which, instead of freeing, ensnares them. The performance permits the subjects to experience a new dimension, more complicated than authenticity, based on awareness of the inner Other, in that, each one of us is both familiar and extraneous to him/herself at the same time and, because cultural “truth” does not exist except as a collage of superimpositions and crossovers between different cultures.

The limitations of postmodern ethnography

Postmodern ethnography has led to heated debates and attracted numerous critical observations (Norris, 1990). The scientific community has pinpointed the weak points of both the theoretical-methodological model and of the philosophy underscoring it. Scepticism concerning the objectivity of the data gathered in the field has arisen, while the emphasis placed on the subjectivity of the author and the social actors, has been considered moralistic: not a methodological choice but—especially in the case of critical ethnography, which seems to aspire at freeing the oppressed – an ideological-political (Rosenau, 1992; Greenfield, 2000; D'Andrade, 1995; Bishop, 1996; Sahlins, 1993; Mellino 2005) even a religious option (McKinley, 2000). Melford E. Spiro, again on the issue of objectivity, reminds postmodernist ethnographers that the reality and the language that describe it exist regardless of the mental representations provided by the social subjects (1996). Furthermore, language is referential, it refers to real objects, and contributes – with logic and rationality – to the creation of knowledge which is objective and inter-subjective. Postmodern ethnography, according to its critics, questions the aims, methods and forms of scientific discourse, claiming a methodological pluralism tending towards anarchy and the invention of unprecedented forms of communication (Hopper, 1998; Haarsager, 1998; Valentine & Valentine, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Krizek, 1998). It cultivates the illusion of being able to go beyond literary convention, beyond policies of identity, beyond genre (LeGuin, 1989).

It is true that classical ethnography implies a series of pretences - for example, the datum is not "gathered" but built into a relationship which excludes the Other (Affergan, 1991) – but it is equally true that the postmodern style is also a fake, it pretends to include. The negotiation is carried out by ethnographers. It is they who handle the narrative transposition of the dialogues which actually took place in the field. Even if they apply reflexivity and place themselves within the text, they may be easily conditioned by a personal interpretation and transmit an observational account that has in any case been distorted (Schwalbe, 1995). All of the forms of communication chosen by postmodern ethnographers are rhetorical inventions (Lamarque, 1990; Bell, 1990): the dialogue model, hinged on the dual relationship with the privileged informant (Dwyer, 1982); the polyphonic one, which claims grasping the plurality of the voices existing in the community (Cesareo, 2004), is a kind of revival of the Greek chorus, which is supposed to embody the authority of the natives. Both, by subtracting the presence of the ethnographer, smack of naïveté: the authors may not be overtly present in the text, but they are undoubtedly present in the para-text as well as during its publication and marketing stages. Even alternative writings and critiques have their own rhetoric and poetics, and there is always an author who assumes responsibility by signing the work (Fontana, 1990 e 2003). The death of the author is fictitious: even when authors are apparently absent, they exercise their powers by deciding on the style and genre the text is to assume. Criticism of the hegemony of anthropological authority was clear: the ethnographers who faded into the background to make way for Others and delivered them to the authority of the word, were a deception. And, when they did not eclipse themselves, they narrated themselves in a manner dominated by their own legend: an imaginary story about themselves. For Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary Gergen (1987), even in our most solitary monologues, "truth“ appears unreachable, as the

multiple versions of the same event fatally overlap⁵. Refusal of the great narratives was thus transformed into an abundance of meta-narrations and micro-ideologies. Furthermore, the principal promises of postmodern ethnography, in particular in its critical form, were not maintained because they entered into conflict with each other and with the researchers' own sets of values (Gunzenhauser, 2004).

Some of these observations are to be found in one exemplary case: a critical reading of a famous text by Vincent Crapanzano - *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (1980) by Toshiko Sakamoto (2005) a Japanese scholar who accuses the author of failing to reach the objectives he had set himself. *Tuhami* is typical of the ethnography post modernists refer to when they wish to offer an example of authorial self-reflexivity, dialogue, polyphony, of interaction with the field, of correct identity policy and, lastly, of a writing style devoid of the mechanisms of classical ethnographical rhetoric. Crapanzano meets Tuhami during his investigation of possession cults: Tuhami claims being the husband of a female demon, who has possessed him, preventing him from living his life. Departing from this datum, the story of Tuhami's life continues as a dialogue and is reported in an interactive narrative text, where the ethnographer applies participant observation to the account of Tuhami's life and constructs the story through a succession of negotiations of meaning. Crapanzano portrays himself within the story, with all his rational analyses of Tuhami's accounts of magic and possession. Sakamoto questions the method, which, in her opinion, produces ambiguity and forced representation of the interviewee while, point by point, she demolishes the claim that Crapanzano's work is a model of alternative ethnography, capable of providing a sincere confrontation between cultures and giving the Other a voice. She shows that the text contains various "areas of ambiguity".

The first objection regards the relationship between Crapanzano and Tuhami, as well as the language used to report it. Crapanzano's approach to the object of his study – possession cults– is based on an established ethnological tradition, which avails of categories of a psychiatric and psychoanalytical type. Between the ethnographer and the informant transference occurs, with Crapanzano in the role of the psychoanalyst and Tuhami playing the part of the patient. A power relationship is established (another form of colonial power, claims Sakamoto, in agreement with Marcus) which is transferred into the language and into the story (Hacking, 1982), in that, Tuhami's words are reported within an aura of the fantastic and associated with the imaginary of the magic of his culture, while the ethnographer's discourse develops along the rational and logical lines of research. Naturally, the Moroccan's story is not innocent either, because Tuhami negotiates meaning in terms of the culture of another and avails of narrative devices to capture the attention of the western scholar. However, in the text, the dominant position is that held by Crapanzano, and is paternalistic, protective, therapeutic. He, for example, makes a methodological distinction between the *reality* of Tuhami's personal story, measured on the basis of the correspondence between his story and his actions, and the *truth* of the autobiography made of textual coherence. As the reality of the story – based on the world of magic and the intervention of spirits within the human dimension –is inconceivable for western rationality, he ends by defining as *metaphor* what western ethnographers used to call superstition. It is the story of the curious "matrimony" with the she-devil that is called a "metaphor", as the mental grid of the western ethnographer is incapable of classifying an encounter with a demon as real. Sakamoto calls this kind of analytical operation exercise of power by a strong culture to the detriment of a weak one.

Another important ambiguity, according to Sakamoto, lies in the temporal distance between the in-field period and the moment when the report is actually written. As the field notes regard, above all, the interviewee's and not the researcher's experience, it happens that, once he returns home, Crapanzano is no longer able to reconstruct his emotions. The relationships with the Other requires the dissolution and reconstruction of the ethnographer's self redefined in terms of relations with the informant (Bourdieu, 1992; Seale *et al.*, 2004). But this can happen only in the field. Once home, the researcher assumes once again the point of view of his own culture and solidly re-enters his

⁵ Sakamoto devotes attention also to the "other inside", with which the ethnographer is obliged to come to terms, but a discussion of this topic would require more space that it is possible to concede here.

professional self, while the Other remains a silent audience⁸. The inevitable result is that in the text it is difficult to distinguish between the reality of Tuhami's life and the fiction of Crapanzano's story.

The final but important ambiguity detected by Sakamoto is the total, inexplicable absence of Lahcen, the translator, who played a decisive role in negotiating the meaning of what emerged in the field. Crapanzano's observational research report involved three people, not two. It is the translator – belonging to a different tribe from Tuhami's, and this cannot be without significance – that made the communications, on which the research was based, possible. This, which is apparently a mere detail, shows, according to Sakamoto that hidden areas of ambiguity exist in the dynamics of the ethnographical interview and, as a result, in the portrayal of the other culture.

Vocabularies of diversity: integrated methodologies

The criticism that classical and postmodern ethnographers have directed against each other, have not created an unbridgeable gap between these two styles of research, of writing about and engaging with the Other. Many years have passed (1980's and 1990's) since postmodernism and poststructuralism gained credence and consensus and the debate between the upholders of the different approaches hovered on the brink of polemics. During the past decade one notices a significant methodological integration between both stances. In particular, analytical ethnography – which inherits, from classical ethnography, a realistic attitude, an appeal to objectivity and an explicative approach (Blumer, 1954; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lofland, 1971) – has taken on board some of the fundamental instances of postmodern ethnography (Knorr-Cetina & Cicourel, 1981; Lofland, 1985; Vaughan, 2007). The crisis of representation, writes Sara Delamont (2004), played an extremely positive role because it raised the level of awareness of ethnographical authors, even of those who practice analytical ethnography. She recalls the fact that after the textual turn only two ways out were available: a pessimistic route, which would have led to silence and the impossibility of finding the words for the Other, and a more optimistic one, which was to address the issue. This second way, in actual fact, was the one put into practice by many ethnographers, who learnt to recognise the rhetorical conventions of scientific discourse, and treat them for what they were (devices) and explore them creatively. Contemporary ethnographers, whatever style they may opt for, are aware that data emerge in a context of dialogical negotiation between the social actors; they are aware of producing non-innocent representation, but, despite this, they do not renounce their scientific mission. The field – Delamont writes – is never entirely ours, but there is still a lot of work for us to do (Delamont, 2004: 227).

Today there exists the concrete possibility of amalgamating the two methods, and, therefore, of consolidating, within the scientific community, the use of dialogue with the Other in research. Leon Anderson's (2006) article is an example of this; here the scholar blends the typically postmodern auto-ethnographical genre with the analytical methodology of which he is an authoritative representative. Anderson remarks how in the past fifteen or twenty years, auto-ethnography has been associated exclusively with the literary, evocative genre (Adams, Ellis & Bochner, 2011), whose chief problem is denial of the possibility that the ethnographer may produce theory. Because of this, this style appears to the critical ethnographers as inevitably egocentric, built up behind the back of the Other who is not allowed to make his voice heard. In reality, auto-ethnography is older; it has classical origins with roots in the symbolical interactionism of the first and second Chicago Schools.

Confusion between scientific and literary discourse and hybridisation between the two are among the main critical objections raised by the academic community against postmodern auto-ethnography. This critical stance accuses the auto-ethnographical approach of descending into literary narration or poetical communication and, therefore, of disregarding the analytical mission of sociology and renouncing the discipline's cognitive grasp of social phenomena. Another important objection raised regards the strategies applied to verify and appraise the outcome of auto-ethnographical studies, where, in actual fact, the ethnographer is the only source of the data reported. The critics of the approach also claim that the social research conducted availing exclusively of auto-ethnographical tools risks invalidation because of a tendency to slip into

autobiography and narcissism.

The way Anderson describes this particular method shows, clearly, how a large part of postmodernism has been blended, over the past decade, into the analytical current. Anderson clarifies immediately that the added value of analytical auto-ethnography lies in the fact that, although it adopts self-reflexive criteria and researcher visibility in the field and in the text, the scientific commitment to the construction of theory is never overlooked. For this reason, he addresses his realist colleagues illustrating the advantages of the genre, as long as the boundaries between science and literature are not crossed. The auto-ethnographical technique can be appreciated by analytical ethnographers, not because it provides an emotional outlet, but because it guarantees a better and more profound knowledge of the field.

He foregrounds as a model the auto-ethnographical applied by Robert F. Murphy's in *The Body Silent*, 1987, a story of illness narrated in evocative and gripping prose, but where the emotional component does not override conceptual abstraction and the explicative purpose of the story. The virtues of this ethnographical autobiography comply with the rules codified by Anderson to amplify the potential of the genre and include it within the spectrum of analytical ethnographical techniques. Five key features, in his opinion, are useful to define the research practice of the ethnographer who engages in self-observation and self-narration. The ethnographer must: 1. be a well-established part of the field being studied, a member of a particular community; 2. practice self-reflexion; 3. practice narrative visibility by including him/herself in the text; 4. engage in dialogue with the informant and the social actors; 5. be committed to theoretical analysis. These key features – one notes that four of the five points listed by Anderson coincide with the postmodernist decalogue– must be taken as an attempt to conjugate reflexivity with the need to achieve conceptual abstraction and comply with the explicative mission of social research. Anderson calls them “data-transcending practices”, because they are well rooted in data but aimed at the development of theory.

Among the analytical ethnographer's best practices, the techniques recommended by the postmodernists have been included and enrich and refine the toolbox of the contemporary researcher. It has been possible for this to happen because epistemological and methodological reflection has moved in the direction of flexibility and the integration of whatever methods may be best suited to the efficient execution of research. G.B. Madison, as early as the end of the 1980's, suggested that the notion of “method” be critically redefined and no longer considered a system of rules, but rather a set of principles, to be applied following an accurate interpretation of the context (1988).

In an essay published in 2001, *Etnografia e riflessività. Le pratiche riflessive costrette nei binari del discorso scientifico*, Cardano presents a detailed account of how traditional ethnographical research may benefit from a textual, reflexive approach, once it is free from postmodern philosophy. His essay starts with a severe criticism of methodological pluralism, seen as a system which bases the plausibility of its ethnographical knowledge on criteria other than those regulating quantitative research. He does not, however, suggest that the solution lies in monism as we intend it today. Cardano endorses, in fact, Madison's criticism and proposes replacing method, considered as a univocal set of impersonal rules meant to guarantee objectivity, with one consisting in a set of principles, the application of which makes evaluation of the specificity of context, that is interpretation, mandatory.

Against the background of this weak conception of method, Mario Cardano drew up the principles underscoring the plausibility of the assertions of sociology:

- the principle of objectivity, as per the Weberian notion of intersubjective knowledge;
- the principle of the validity of the inferential procedures, which must aim at generalizability.

Declining and classifying similar methodological principles, Cardano adamantly argues in favour of the position held by C. A. Davies, who proposes reconsidering reflexive practices, making them independent of and free from the epistemological bonds of postmodernism (1999). For Cardano, reflexivity is, for ethnography, “the tool best suited to qualify the objectivity and generality of one's statements, thus completing the restitution (or surrender) of reflexive practices to scientific discourse” (2001: 174).

Cardano explains why reflexivity is particularly appropriate to ethnography as a means of bestowing direction upon research methodology. He defines ethnography as a technique for the

observation of social interaction, carried out within a natural context and characterised by the participation of the ethnographer in the daily lives of the natives being studied. This technique presents a number of distinct features:

- the ethnographer acts both as observer and observational tool;
- the ethnographer’s subjectivity is rectified through “submission to the object”;
- the link between the theoretical constructs and the observational terms may be established only after the research has been concluded;
- the concepts availed of cannot be constructed operatively but may only act as sensitising factors;
- it is the (long period of) time required by the project that permits “repeated measurements”;
- the objects of ethnographical technique are “microscopic” (one or more case studies).

These are the characteristics which, according to Cardano, analytical ethnographers need to add to the reflexive practices contained in their toolboxes. Contrary to what one might be led to believe, says Cardano, is the fact that it is reflexivity itself that guarantees the achievement of the scientific mission, that is, of assuring the objectivity and the generalizability of the results of research. Thanks to the reflexive procedure, ethnographers will be able to account for the manner in which they construct and monitor the trustworthiness and validity of the knowledge they ask the scientific community to accept. Not being able to expect ethnographers to provide statistics calculated on the basis of correlational matrices, Cardano asks himself whether they may be required, instead, to account for the trustworthiness and validity of their procedures by recurring to the tool which, within the context of ethnography, is analogous to statistical procedures: reflexive reporting. It is upon the meticulous descriptions provided by their observational reports that ethnographers may found the objectivity of the manner in which they represent the objects of their studies.

The voice of the Other in the globalised world

Nascent globalisation (together with the end of colonialism) triggered off, over the past few decades, a discovery of the Other and the subsequent quest for a new non-ethnocentric vocabulary. The completion of the globalising thrust – to date – brings further impetus to bear on instances of authentic dialogue with Others who are, at this stage, the victims of globalisation itself above all. Achieved globalisation creates relevant epistemological and methodological consequences for the ethnography of difference. While, at the close of the past century, research into the Other consisted in the production of new investigational languages and techniques, today, it seems that the issue of words to describe the Other has produced a broadening of the horizons of research, ranging from the reversal of the traditional conception of field, to a significant shift in the meaning of terms like *global* and *local* and, finally, the loss of the significance of the borders and pickets traditionally demarking ethnographical investigation. The emphasis has shifted from a redefinition of vocabulary to the establishment of the perimeters of research, from refining language to an enlargement of the view of the world. In short, the focus has moved from the issue of representing of the Other to that of the extent of the area of research. If previously, to give voice to Others, one offered them a pen or a microphone, now the intention is to detect the connections existing between the local conditions (of exclusion and hardship) experienced by the Other and the choices made by global capitalism. The market models do not see the immobilization and ghettoization generated by international practices; nor are they aware of the abjection experienced by those confined to abandoned marginal areas. Ethnography, in all its various declensions, realises that the field is no longer circumscribable and that the phenomena observed by it can no longer be explained – or even simply narrated – in a self-referential manner. Ethnography is realising, in the field, that the global is concealed more and more within the folds of all situations perceived as local, revealing the limitations of present-day globalisation fantasies. There are globalisation ethnographies which express the issue of the words for the Other by paying critical attention to the object of research by denying the assumption that globalisation is simply a spread of modernity, connections, networks, mobility. These ethnographers focus, instead, on the disconnections and the lacerating effects of globalisation on those whose daily lives have been deprived of meaning and relevance, crushed and marginalised within non-productive outlying areas. The cognitive role of ethnography manifests itself by deciphering the global/local binomial, keeping it at a clear distance from the universal/particular pole, and freeing it from geographical ties: can New York be defined simply as

global?

The sociological weight of the term globalisation is vague and has not as yet been properly defined. Anthony Giddens calls it second modernity (1990), taking for granted the worldwide spread of western cultural and institutional models. He uses the concept of *structuration* to explain how globalisation is capable of enabling and coercing. But, as the Marxist Michael Burawoy (2000) observes, he does not say who is being coerced and who is enabled. Again Burawoy proposes that the evolutionist portrayal of capitalism be refused and that the way global processes impact on concrete reality at local level be studied in detail along with the specific effects they have on daily living. Globalisation is not a definitive, inevitable process, but a set of reversible projects, to be verified one by one, in particular from the point of view of power.

Ethnographers hold that it is necessary to discover how globalisation is constructed, perceived and legitimised, and that, to this end, ethnography is particularly suited "As a method that requires immersion in a local setting and direct contact with informants, ethnography provides the ideal tools to investigate the diversities and heterogeneous manifestations of world-wide capitalism" (Lapegna, 2009: 5). Ethnography is expected to be conceptually less abstract and more precise.

Pablo Lapegna (2009) distinguishes, within the vast range of new ethnographies, two main research currents, two new vocabularies devised to narrate the Other in this era of liquid society and globalisation: George Marcus's (1995) *multi-site ethnography* and Michael Burawoy's (2000) *global ethnography*. He examines the differences between the two approaches from the point of view of the sites, the contexts, the research and reflexivity designs. Multi-site ethnography questions the practice whereby traditional ethnography delimits the site, which, instead, "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" (Marcus 1995: 96). Marcus's key phrase is *follow the people*, from migrants to the metaphors, from objects to money. The ethnographer no longer finds a prefabricated site, but must build one up by availing of the connections created by the global reality: it is to be conceived less in terms of space and more in terms of shifting locations⁶. The various components of the site are brought together by the researcher's scientific discourse and argumentation. For new ethnography travel and mobility and not long-term settlement are the priorities. From the point of view of global ethnography – while agreeing with the abandonment of the traditional circumscribed site – the choice of sites proposed by Marcus is arbitrary, because it fails to provide room for the historical study of how the sites themselves were produced, how they acquired their specific characteristics. The ethnographer must "replace abstract globalization with a grounded globalization that tries to understand not only the experience of globalization but also how that experience is produced in specific localities and how that productive process is a contested and thus a political accomplishment" (Burawoy 2001:158). Global ethnography focuses on precise characteristics of the site: the wealth of multiple connections with the outside, porous and conflictual confines, stratified social relations. The multiple sites proposed by Marcus is one mode of research, but it is also possible to work with a single site, as long as one is capable of investigating the connections between it and global processes. Burawoy holds that the local is always associated with the global, and that by starting with the past and paying attention to historical change, availing of ethno-historical methods, it is possible to explain how certain connections are produced and reproduced, and/or can destabilise power hierarchies. According to Burawoy, it is thanks to broader forces that the ethnographer understands globalisation processes.

According to Marcus, ethnographers ought not to represent the world of the Other by imposing their own theoretical categories on them, therefore, the research background, the context, cannot be described in terms – like capitalism, nation, world system – recollective of grand narratives, vitiated by ethnocentrism and theory-centrism. Definitions of context are not produced within ethnographical relations; therefore, multi-site ethnography does not avail of them as explicative categories, so as not to usurp the Other's right to define him/herself. The categories need to emerge from the core of the research and the field, as in the case of the grounded theory. The theory must stem from the logical relations that the ethnographer establishes by comparing sites and analysing

6 Multi-site research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of location in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography" (Marcus 1995: 105).

the connections between them. For global ethnography, on the contrary, research is a place of theoretical challenge. Burawoy says that the field cannot be simply a matter of "look and see", but must be the focus of expectations of knowledge, because ethnographers are bearers of theory (Burawoy, 2003). Without theoretical supports, they could not study the multiform modalities by which global capitalism and nation-interact with local actors. Nor could they see global forces as specific products of contingent processes and not as natural, inevitable phenomena. For example, Sheba George's research regarding Indian carers in the United States (2000) is capable of explaining how global forces create conditions whereby migration occurs and causes change within female family hierarchies back in India. The local effects of global phenomena, for global ethnography, have an important historical weight. Therefore, ethnographers should consider the ways in which the sites change because of external conditioning factors and found their research on local history, and even return to study sites examined previously to better grasp diachronic developments, as in the extended case method (Burawoy, 2000), that involves, a return to the field and present-day verification of certain theories drawn up in the past.

From the point of view of reflexivity too, ethnographies of globalisation diverge. The words used to define the Other depend on the type of reflexivity adopted. For multi-site ethnography, it is a question of controlling power relations within the field as well as the description of the Other in the text. For Marcus, ethnographers must renegotiate their identity in continuation, by management of the public presentation of the results. The emphasis is placed in the identity of the researcher, on power relations with the informant and the text. For global ethnography, on the contrary, reflexivity consists in self-control of theory, as the categories applied in the field may be influenced by cogent conventions and pre-comprehensions. It is not so much concerned about the representation of the Other in the text, as avoiding a portrayal of globalisation functional to the privileged position of the ethnographer. It fears a kind of class ideology as well as the use of comfortable pro-western theoretical tools. The reflexivity availed of by global ethnography has repercussions on research resources, university apparati, on the institutional structures capable of directing research and influencing theoretical work.

The two currents of ethnographical thinking and practice differ in many ways: multi-site ethnography is heir to the literary/hermeneutic turn and is based on postmodern epistemology and on participatory observation; global ethnography stems from the historical turn and is based on realistic pragmatism and analytical ethnography. Both schools provide different answers to the same theoretical and methodological question: how to be an ethnographer of globalisation? According to Lapegna, with the answers they provide in the field, they seek to avoid the dangers both of naïve constructionism and positivistic realism. Despite the differences, they share an attitude concerning globalisation: they do not take it for granted and problematise ready-made global and local concepts, which are cultural constructs to be investigated and specified. Above all, both represent a new way, tailored to contemporary society, of exercising reflexivity and the quest for a vocabulary best suited to narrating the Other.

Conclusions

The construction of a vocabulary suited to describing the Other has for some time now been one of the tasks of the social sciences, of ethnography in particular. The attempt to overcome nineteenth-century approaches to cultural has engaged the twentieth century in a ceaseless quest for tools capable of favouring dialogue efficiently. The end of colonialism has led to the questioning of classical monographic reports, based on presumed objectivity, and given way to daring postmodern experimentation, characterised by emphasis on subjectivity and a weak relationship with theory building. These two characteristics have been criticised by analytical ethnography, which reprimands the postmodernists for having adopted new rhetorical devices, within managing to give different cultures an effective hearing. Yet, the critics of postmodernity have not underestimated the heuristic potentialities of reflexivity in research.

The reflexive method has been incorporated by analytical ethnography, which has attributed it epistemological relevance – as an instrument of objectivity and the generalizability of ethnographical assertions – and included it in a methodology which accepts confrontation with

otherness, while confirming the importance of theory. An ulterior development in efforts aimed at promoting dialogue between different cultures, is attributable to the ethnographers of globalisation, who have shifted the focus from the representation of the Other to the range of the research horizons now available, and brought the gaze of ethnography to dwell on the outlying regions of the world, peopled by the excluded, where local problems reveal the evident links existing between them and global choices.

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