

BOOK REVIEW

Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project

MICHAEL JACKSON

Minima Ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project. Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998, xi + 242 pp., references, index. ISBN 0-223-38946-4.

Michael Jackson's latest book presents a continuation and a self-reflexive summary of his earlier works on phenomenological anthropology. On another level, it also sums up a variety of questions with regard to the nature of anthropological (mostly ethnographic) research, especially when it comes to *relationships*—between individual people, but also between nations, tribes, objects and concepts. Using the examples from his fieldwork in Sierra Leone (among the Kuranko) and Australia (the Warlpiri of central Australia and the Kuku-Yalanji of south-east Cape York), Jackson explores the limits and possibilities of the theoretical approach that takes as its starting point intersubjectivity. He sets out to 'explore the *dialectic* of the particular and the universal as it makes its appearance in the personal life of the peoples among whom I have carried out fieldwork' (p. 4). In doing so, he relies on the rich tradition in anthropology and in social sciences (Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Geertz), but even more on a rich philosophical tradition of existentialism (Buber, Schutz, James, Dewey, G.H. Mead, Sartre). As a matter of fact, the title of the book (*Minima Ethnographica*) reminds one of Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (as Jackson himself notes on p. 36). Hence, there is much more in this work than just the outline of a theory of intersubjectivity—it could be read as a program (or even a manifesto) for a particular kind of anthropology. Given the book's rich and multilayered philosophical premises, its reception will also depend to a great extent on whether the readers accept the existential/phenomenological premises on which Jackson bases his theory.

The book is organized into five chapters (Preamble, Returns, Digressions, Assays, and Here/Now). Jackson navigates through different theories and reminiscences of his fieldwork in a unique prose style, quite rare in anthropology (after all, he is also the author of prize-winning books of poetry and novels). This makes it pleasant to read, despite the complex arguments and numerous cross-references it presents. The book also resembles a kind of a personal journey, not unlike recent work by Nigel Rapport (1994), for

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example. Of course, every anthropological endeavor is a deeply personal one, and lives of the anthropologists that went into the field are inseparable from the way(s) in which they described and interpreted their data (one of the most famous examples is Malinowski as described in his own diary). The relation between the universal and the particular has been problematized recently—especially in the works of contemporary philosophers like Laclau and Balibar. So, one might ask, what is it that makes Jackson's project unique?

First of all, there are questions. 'How particular is related to the universal is one of the most ubiquitous and persistent questions in human life' (p. 2). Michael Jackson proceeds with what he calls an 'existential-phenomenological deconstruction', building upon Lévi-Strauss's idea of anthropology as 'a general theory of relationships' (Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 95, quoted on p. 3). Jackson gives priority to the social aspect of the relationships in order to demonstrate the value of intersubjectivity for ethnographic analysis.

The question of the relationship between particular and universal domains thus dissolves into a set of questions about how we give and take of *intersubjective* life in all its modes and mediations—physical and metaphysical, conscious and unconscious, passive and active, kind and unkind, serious and ludic, dyadic and collective, symmetrical and asymmetrical, inclusive and exclusive, emphatic and antagonistic—which prefigures and configures more discursive forms of relationship. (p. 4)

The concept of intersubjectivity, as the author puts it, is particularly useful in three ways.

First, it resonates with the manner in which many non-Western peoples tend to emphasize identity as 'mutually arising'—as relational and variable—rather than assign ontological primacy to the *individual* persons or objects that are implicit in any intersubjective nexus. . . . Second, the notion of intersubjectivity helps us elucidate a critical characteristic of preliterate thought, namely, the way it tends to construe *extrapsychic* processes that we construe as *intrapsychic*. The unconscious . . . is in a preliterate society more likely to be called the unknown. . . . Finally, the notion of intersubjectivity helps us unpack the relationship between two different but vitally connected senses of the word *subject*—the first referring to the empirical person, endowed with consciousness and will, the second, to abstract generalities such as society, class, gender, nation, structure, history, culture, and tradition that are subjects of our thinking but not themselves possessed of life. (p. 7)

There are at least two different ways to interpret this theoretical framework. One is to see it (and use it) as a way of rationalizing and translating (into the discourse of anthropology and social sciences) the narratives and worldviews of the peoples studied. Thus, we use our (western) categories—such as 'the world of life', 'the unconscious', or '*politics, history, economics, law, religion, and even culture*' (p. 21)—to refer to the categories of the people we study. However, there are problems. Each translation is essentially an *interpretation*. For example, stating that the 'aboriginal people construe history as ever present, and ancestral land assumes for them the same vital force that self and soul have for us' (p. 7), implies a distinction between 'their' construction of history ('as ever present') and 'ours' (*not* 'as ever

present'). But this distinction does not exist—and it is difficult to see someone defending it, following the writings of authors like Foucault (to whom Jackson refers frequently) and Hayden White. History is always a story about the present, written from the perspective of the present, and with very concrete (usually political) aims and agendas. While trying to make the 'native' categories comprehensible to *us*, we do not necessarily say anything about *them*. In this sense, every work of anthropology is essentially a self-reflexive and a self-reflecting endeavor—it might say very little about the 'natives', but it will say a lot about the writer (anthropologist/ethnographer) and the cultural context that she/he comes from. The problem gets even more complicated when one uses a complex philosophical vocabulary (as Michael Jackson does). On the other hand, one might argue that, since our understanding of any 'foreign' or 'other' culture is bound to be limited and incomplete, the least we could do it is to render it in terms understandable to *our* audience (readers, students, etc.).

Jackson mentions seven types of intersubjective ambiguity. 'In the first place, intersubjectivity is a site of constructive, destructive, and reconstructive interaction' (p. 8), it 'moves continually between positive and negative poles'. Thus, going back to Mauss and the gift, it moves from sustaining amity and bolstering alliances, but also 'to the violent acts of seizure, revenge, and repossession that are provoked when one party denies or diminishes the integrity (*mana*) of another' (pp. 8–9). That second type has to do with the fact that 'in any human encounter, idiosyncratic, ideational, and impersonal elements commingle and coalesce' (p. 9). The third type of intersubjective ambiguity takes off from Hegel: regardless of the extent of 'social inequality between self and other, each is *existentially* dependent on and beholden to the other'. For the next type, Jackson refers to Simmel,¹ claiming that while 'the elementary structure of intersubjectivity is dyadic', this dyad is still 'mediated by . . . a third party, a shared idea, a common goal' (p. 9). The fifth type of ambiguity stresses the role of the 'unconscious, habitual, taken-for-granted dispositions'. The sixth one is summarized in the statement that 'intersubjectivity reflects the instability of human consciousness' (pp. 9–10), while the seventh type is put in terms that the 'intersubjective ambiguity can also be explored as a problem of knowledge' (p. 10)—or, even without referring to Merleau-Ponty or Husserl, the problem of knowing the other.

For Jackson, intersubjectivity provides the key to understanding how we understand others, since any understanding must go beyond the level of epistemology and cognition and approach empathy. (Jackson actually uses the word 'analogy', p. 97.) It could be objected that this requires a sort of empathic *Einfühlung* which might be too difficult to use when dealing with others. How do we describe people(s) to which we are emotionally bound? How do we interpret their ways which might differ so much from what we have learned to regard as 'right' or 'wrong'? Finally, is it not that a kind of

empathy can just obliterate some of the daily problems that the people we study face? We can assume to understand them and that understanding could be deemed as sufficient—regardless of other things more important for ‘them’. Empathy can be too passive and just as generalizing as any other form of interpretation. It is also based on (culture-specific) norms and values and its value yet remains to be seen. (For example, one might wonder about the merits of empathy with the Kuranko now, when Sierra Leone is plunged into the abyss of civil war and the international community seems to be paralyzed and without any idea how to act.)

With its insistence on ‘life stories’ intersubjectivity brings one closer to details of everyday lives of the people studied. On the other hand, as a method that emphasizes relationships, it also puts in perspective the life of observers, nicely illustrated in the book by Jackson’s reminiscences of his informant Noah Marah (pp. 98–108). That we cannot exist without others seems obvious and almost tautological. However, sometimes it takes a while for obvious truths to enter into the mainstream current of a discipline. In a fascinating account of the first contact of the natives of the Papua New Guinea eastern highlands and the whites in the early 1930s, we see how the idea of the whites as others was constructed—the usual issues about their humanity (human, spirits or descendants of gods?), whether they were alive or not, etc. However, there is also an ‘etherialization of the strangers’—‘otherness was experienced as a lack of substantiality’ (p. 112).

It was as if the white man’s anomalous place in the indigenous world bestowed a kind of unreality on them, such that they are thought to lack true bodiliness. People denied that men from heaven defecated. Women wondered whether the strangers had penises. (p. 112)

This book is about relationships but it is as much about voyages, shifting (or ‘zigzagging’—to borrow an expression from Rapport) from one place to another (frequently, from one continent to another), from one ‘life story’ to another, from one contact to another. It is essentially a book about one way of doing anthropology, deeply personal and yet open to any other adherents of the phenomenological approach. Perhaps some of the statements sound too trivial, even if they are put in relatively simple terms, and I think that Jackson could do well without them. For example: ‘My fieldwork in central Australia brought me to an existential understanding of the way subjectivity inevitably entails intersubjectivity, and vice versa’ (p. 137), ‘Existentially, loss is a reduction to nothingness’ (p. 17), or ‘Seen from space, the earth deepens our sense of the infinite and unknown’ (p. 25). Jackson is at his very best when he writes about peoples and places, when he shows how the intricate fabric of relationships is torn apart and patched again, how human beings try to control their destinies and rationalize the events that shape their lives, how myths and histories overlap and how they cannot be distinguished. I have to admit that I have certain problems with his discussion of the universal and particular. When Jackson writes,

'The problem is one of disentangling the notion of the universal from the notion of privileged position' (p. 190), he is not presenting anything new or original. Lévi-Strauss dealt with it, so did Asad, Geertz, and so have Marcus and many others in the last two decades. When he wonders 'is the only true human universal the need for human universals?' (p. 206), this sounds just like another western 'folk model'—and it is worth asking about its actual informative value for understanding others. But then, *Minima Ethnographica* is also about understanding ourselves and renegotiating our own concepts, ideas, and methodologies. It is a book about the journey of phenomenological anthropology through its most prominent representative, a sort of the 'anthropology of anthropology' seen 'from the native's point of view'. And the fact that the native here is Michael Jackson just adds to this.

NOTE

1. Besides references to Simmel and Sartre, this type seems to be in the tradition of German idealism—from Kant's categories to Hegel's dialectical model—where the two elements are always mediated by the third one.

REFERENCES

- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1963) *Totemism*, tr. Rodney Needham. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Rapport, Nigel (1994) *The Prose and the Passion: Anthropology, Literature, and the Writing of E. M. Forster*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

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