Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery[1]

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Sherry Ortner's account of the development of anthropological theory is admirable both because of the complexity of her argument and because it opens up a series of interesting possibilities for theoretical self-criticism among anthropologists. In this essay, I consider a theme which is not directly addressed in Ortner's piece, but which might usefully be considered in relation to it. The theme involves the significance of *place* in the construction of anthropological theory in the period since World War II.

Like the purloined letter, place is so much in the foreground of the anthropological consciousness that its importance has been taken for granted and its implications have not been systematically explored. Whatever else might be in dispute, the idea that culture is a *local* dimension of human behavior is a tenacious and widespread assumption. Though this assumption is itself overdue for critical appraisal, this is not the appropriate format for arguing that need. What does however seem appropriate is that the systematic analysis of locality, as a conceptual issue, and place, as the empirical counterpart to it, be undertaken by those who are concerned about the future of anthropological theory.[2] The comments that follow do no more than sketch out a series of themes (with a minimal set of examples) that suggest why it is worth looking at the history of anthropological theory from this point of view.

At least since the latter part of the nineteenth century, anthropological theory has always been based on the practice of going *somewhere,* preferably somewhere geographically, morally, and socially distant from the theoretical

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[1] Comments inspired by Sherry B. Ortner's article, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 26:1 (1984), 126–66.

[2] The only context, so far as I am aware, in which there has been any direct discussion of the problem of place is the post-World War II policy debates and initiatives surrounding area studies programs in the United States. But these discussions have largely been confined to fiscal, strategic, and programmatic matters rather than to fundamental intellectual ones. Further, at least for anthropologists, the problem of place is far more general than the rubric *area studies* suggests.

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and cultural metropolis of the anthropologist. The science of the other has inescapably been tied to the journey elsewhere. But the question of what kind of elsewhere is tied in complicated ways to the history of European expansion, the vagaries of colonial and postcolonial pragmatics, the shifting tastes of Western men of letters. In turn, changes in anthropological theorizing, influenced in ill-understood ways by these shifting loci of investigation, have themselves influenced fashions in anthropological travel. Places (i.e., particular areas, locations, cultures, societies, regions, even civilizations) are the objects of anthropological study as well as the critical links between description and analysis in anthropological theory.

Let me start with an observation with which few will quarrel. Though all anthropologists traffic in "otherness," we may note that it has always been true that some others are more other than others. From the start, the ethos of anthropology has been driven by the appeal of the small, the simple, the elementary, the face-to-face. In a general way, this drive has had two implications for anthropological theory. The first is that certain forms of sociality (such as kinship), certain forms of exchange (such as gift) certain forms of polity (such as the segmentary state) have been privileged objects of anthropological attention and have constituted the prestige zones of anthropological theory. The second result has been that the anthropology of complex non-Western societies has, till recently, been a second-class citizen in anthropological discourse. This second effect involves a kind of reverse Orientalism, whereby complexity, literacy, historical depth, and structural messiness operate as disqualifications in the struggle of places for a voice in metropolitan theory.

Yet this characterization of the role of complex traditional civilizations in anthropological theory is too simple and conspiratorial. The fact is that the anthropology of complex civilizations does exist, but in a peculiar form. In this form, a few simple theoretical handles become metonyms and surrogates for the civilization or society as a whole: hierarchy in India, honor-and-shame in the circum-Mediterranean, filial piety in China are all examples of what one might call gatekeeping concepts in anthropological theory, concepts, that is, that seem to limit anthropological theorizing about the place in question, and that define the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in the region.

Though such gatekeeping concepts are especially slow to change in regard to complex traditional civilizations, there is something of this effect in anthropological theorizing in general. Thus it is that Africa becomes the locus of many classical social forms, such as the lineage or the segment; tropical south America the arch representative of dual organizations and structured mythological discourse; Melanesia the principal exhibit for the manipulation of bodily substances in the management of society and the cosmos; aboriginal Australia the supreme example of the tension between structural simplicity

and classificatory complexity; Polynesia the central place for the mechanics of reciprocity, and so forth. This is not to suggest that such issues are never raised in contexts other than their classical ones, but rather that the original loci retain a special authority in regard to the theoretical issue in question. Nor is it to suggest that this tendency to see whole societies through some particular conceptual vantage point is an ahistorical matter, without dynamic, context, or explanation.

The point is that there is a tendency for places to become showcases for specific issues over time, and that the sources and implications of this tendency are poorly understood. This tendency, especially pronounced in the case of complex societies, has two implications. One is that the discussion of the theoretical issues tends (surreptitiously) to take on a restrictive local cast, while on the other hand the study of other issues in the place in question is retarded, and thus the over-all nature of the anthropological interpretation of the particular society runs the risk of serious distortion. Here, of course, the central questions anthropologists have to ask themselves regarding anthropological theory over time, and at any point in time, concern whether these gatekeeping concepts, these theoretical metonyms, really reflect something significant about the place in question, or whether they reveal a relatively arbitrary imposition of the whims of anthropological fashion on particular places.

Once this question is raised, it dissolves into a host of more specific ones. Why is it that African domestic units have provided the main grist for French anthropological Marxism since the late 1970s? Why is it that theatricality as an aspect of social life appears to be especially salient in parts of mainland and island Southeast Asia? Why are Melanesian and Oceanian studies strongest in providing critiques of key aspects of the theories of social structure generated in Africa? Why was Africa so essential to the "symbolic turn" in the late 1950s and 1960s, and why does classical symbolic anthropology tend now to flourish more in tropical South America and Oceania? Is there something about African cities that made them the richest base for the development of urban anthropology in the 1960s, while the study of cities in other parts of the world stayed unfashionable until very recently?

Each of these questions has an inverse form, as I have already suggested. If places become guardians of particular cultural features or of particular forms of sociality, does this not affect the way these cultural features and forms of sociality are analyzed in other places? Do cities, by definition, tend to be characterized excessively by networks, brokerage, ethnicity, and entrepreneurs as a result of the original African copyright? Do all forms of culturally organized inequality begin to be seen excessively through the trope of caste? Does the special connection of nature and culture in mythological discourse in tropical South America, and its binary ideology, get imputed freely to places where it is less legitimate? Did the African model of segmentation excessively

dominate accounts of social structure in the Middle East, the New Guinea highlands, and elsewhere?

Yet another problem is the relationship, in anthropological theory, between place, comparision, and generalization. To the degree that anthropological theorizing has been unwittingly affected by the shifting loci of its production, comparison becomes difficult, for a critical dimension of variability (not just in the data but in the relationship between observer and observed) is left unexamined. Where comparison (and generalization) have been successful in anthropology, they have occurred most often in the context of small-scale societies and have involved highly schematized aspects of social life, such as kinship terminology. As the societies under consideration become more complex, literate, and historical, the kind of decontextualization that facilitates generalization becomes harder to accomplish. Comparison also becomes difficult when theoretical interest focuses on qualitative, subjective, and experiential aspects of social life, rather than on quantitative, objective, or structural phenomena. Thus, the "interpretive turn" in cultural anthropology, which dates from the early 1970s, and the recent interest in the historicity of small-scale societies, both remarked by Ortner, tend to carry on an old tilt in anthropology, which is to localize the human condition. On the other hand, the other recent trends in anthropology discussed by Ortner, which focus on practice and on political economy, tend, for all their differences, to look for cross-cultural regularities.

To conduct a full historical examination of these issues (assuming that their general thrust is conceded to be legitimate) would entail taking into account a whole range of factors, only some of which are normally considered even by historically reflective anthropologists. They include: the theoretical power of the founding "work" in its metropolitan locus and the institutional prestige of the founding author in relation to such gatekeeping concepts; shifts in the receptivity of host governments or elites to anthropological work, and to particular brands of anthropological work; shifts in the geographical and theoretical preferences of funding agencies; shifts in the degree to which other neighboring social science disciplines have achieved prestige parity with anthropology in the place in question or have bypassed it altogether; shifts in the degree to which anthropologists pay attention to work in other disciplines, such as history, linguistics, economics, and literary criticism; the pace of development of an autonomous anthropological profession in the place in question; teacher-student relations in choice of field-work site and theoretical approach; and the desire of anthropologists to set their own contributions off from previous theories or concepts associated with a particular place. Many of these factors are furthermore not independent, but rather are mutually related in complicated ways. In assessing their interaction for any particular period, or in regard to any particular problem of theory or method, the nature of particular places is an especially important and underappreciated factor.

The central fact here is that what anthropologists find, in this or that place, far from being independent data for the construction and verification of theory, is in fact a very complicated compound of local realities and the contingencies of metropolitan theory. Needless to say, all the social and human sciences share this problem regarding the relationship between theory and data, observer and observed, subject and object. What I am suggesting is that the "place" aspect of this problem is greater for anthropology than for any of the other human sciences, with the possible exception of history, and that the degree of attention accorded to this factor by anthropologists so far is in inverse proportion to its importance. In the cases of anthropology and history, given their idiographic, qualitative, and narrative orientations, place is not just a trivial contingency associated with data gathering, but a vital dimension of the subject matter of the disciplines. Since a great deal of what I have said so far has been schematic and rhetorical, I conclude with two examples, one which focuses on place and the other on theory.

In regard to place, let us consider the case of India. By and large, anthropological studies of India have focused, both ethnographically and theoretically, on the institution of caste and on its ideological framework—hierarchy. There have been important minority voices, both empirical and theoretical, that have discussed tribes, cities, families, temples, ascetic groups. So also there have been those who have looked at other ideological problems, such as authority, legitimacy, privacy, and domesticity (rather than just hierarchy and its twin—purity/pollution). Yet when India is referred to in the central zones of anthropological theory, it is rarely that caste and hierarchy are not the sole points of interest. In fact, in the last few years, a very complex set of anthropologies has emerged in South Asia, in which classical concerns with hierarchy play some part but do not dominate the proceedings.[3] Yet it is my guess that it will be a long time before these local anthropological contributions will be able to gain a place in metropolitan anthropological discourse. India remains a stellar example of the anthropological black hole, where a variety of ideas, findings, and possibilities vanish from the metropolitan gaze.

Ortner is quite right to note that "history" and "practice" are important symbols of recent anthropological theory. Part of the significance of the idea of practice, especially as discussed by Pierre Bourdieu, is that it encourages us to examine the peculiar complicities between subject and object in anthropological activity. The revived excitement about history has itself a very complex relationship to the theme of this essay, for in different places this excitement takes very different forms. For one thing, certain independent theoretical fashions, involving the conjuncture of history and structure, the nature of theatricality in politics, and the problem of ethnographic time,

[3] The current state of the art in South Asian anthropology is dealt with at some length in a review essay by the author which will appear in the *American Ethnologist* (Spring 1986).

which are of especial interest in the Pacific and in Southeast Asia, might convey the erroneous impression that the problem of dealing with history has not been significantly engaged by anthropologists working in other areas (such as India, Africa, the Middle East, native North America, or China), who might have quite other theoretical agendas. Thus, the geographical loci of the "new" interest in history do themselves conceal the fact that anthropology as a whole has shifted theoretically in ways that make the older modes of, and spatial contexts for, handling history seem less exciting. In fact, the conjunctures that are occurring between the practice of anthropology and history reflect a large number of variations, some of which have to do with older interests and methods in both disciplines in different empirical locations. Thus the dialogue of history with anthropology is very different, depending on whether one eavesdrops on it in Indonesia, India, Africa, Mesoamerica, or Europe, for reasons that have as much to do with the history of anthropology as with what Marshall Sahlins calls the anthropology of history.

Today, thus, place has a dual, even contradictory, relationship to theory in anthropology. On the one hand, as certain kinds of theorizing in anthropology become cryptophilosophical, the original place of origin of ethnographic descriptions becomes quite irrelevant. On the other hand, there is a growing tendency to produce careful, ethnographically based regional collections whose aim is to build theory out of a genuinely multidisciplinary and comparative picture of large regions and civilizations. The arbitrary hegemony of one region or regions over others in the making of anthropological theory is likely to be reified by the first tendency and discouraged by the second. As to which is the more likely possibility, that will depend at least in part on our willingness to be self-conscious about the problem of place in our own theorizing.