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The “Intersubjective turn” and the question of subject in contemporary anthropology:

A review article [*](#)

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INTRODUCTION

Like many other points or concepts being discussed today, the question of intersubjectivity (and of the subject in general) is not at all new in anthropology. In a developed form, it has been with anthropologists and social scientists at least since Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) effectively resolved the debate of whether society comes before individual or individual before society. What remains unresolved, however, is the methodological pattern or justification of studying others as individuals and then comparing them to “us” as individuals as well. What are the differences or similarities between different individualisms? Moreover, can different forms of individualism be compared at all (and how)?

One of the attempts at dealing with this set of problems has been done within the so-called “phenomenological anthropology”, whose leading representative is Michael Jackson. Another recent attempt is characteristic of Nigel Rapport’s work towards “literary and liberal anthropology” — which follows up on the lines of interpretive anthropology made so popular by Geertz since 1973. Taking as my starting point Jackson’s book *Minima Ethnographica* and some Rapport’s texts, I will briefly present here both of these approaches, along with some general questions that they open. While both authors diverge on many issues (including the one of intersubjectivity – which can be, strictly speaking, applied to Jackson only), they have in common an attempt to set the agenda for a new, different, subject-oriented anthropology.

I will not deal here with the more complex problem of studying different categories (like “identity”) within anthropological research. This issue has been addressed recently (for example, Cohen 2000), and while distinctions (like native/stranger, for example) and how one creates them remain an important part of [page 55]

anthropological interpretations, I will concentrate here on some “purely” methodological considerations and the implications they may have for the future research.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL KNOTS

Michael Jackson’s book *Minima Ethnographica* presents a continuation as well as a self-reflexive summary of his earlier works on phenomenological anthropology. On a more general 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 field work in Sierra Leone (among the Kuranko) and Australia (the Warlpiri of central Australia and the Kuku-Yalanji of southeast 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 outlining 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 multi-layered philosophical premises, its reception will also depend to a great extent on whether the readers accept **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 relatively recent work of Nigel Rapport (Rapport 1994), for 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 relations between the universal and the particular have 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? [page 56]

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’ 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 — 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 (“observed”). 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 indigenous 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 I find it extremely difficult to accept that this distinction exists — and it is hard 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* – we [page 57]

frequently end up saying much more about *us*, our own issues, contexts and preoccupations. 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 situation 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 do 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 an *Einfühlung*, which might be too difficult to use when dealing with others. How do we describe people 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 just 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 [page 58]

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 image 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 “etherealization 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” (ibid.).

The 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. 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 did 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 an “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 point.

INDIVIDUAL: TRANSCENDENT, LITERARY OR JUST LIBERAL?

Nigel Rapport has drawn heavily upon literary and philosophical references as well. However, what makes his project different (and less ambitious) is the contextualization — Jackson is primarily an ethnographer, Rapport is above all a theorist.^[2] Another important difference is that Rapport is for the subjective approach – not the [page 59]

intersubjective one. In Rapport’s work, the issue of subject is primarily perceived through relationships of different free individuals, thus incorporating different interpretations present in (and constitutive of) these relationships. This emphasis on

the individual also goes clearly against the Durkhemian (basically, anti-individualist) legacy in anthropology.[\[3\]](#)

The Prose and the Passion (Rapport 1994) takes as its starting point the relationship between anthropology and literature. *What is it that anthropologists do?* is a question to which some would answer simply: *they write*.[\[4\]](#) But what comes before writing? Don't they have to get (collect) their data, organize and classify them, basically, *interpret* them? One of the main criticisms of the "text-centered" or "literary-anthropological" approaches in anthropology has been that they neglect the actual ethnography (*the basics of the discipline*). Rapport tries to read (literary) texts of E. M. Forster as well as anthropologies of various anthropologists (Malinowski, Finnegan, Turner, Poyatos, Hymes, Needham, among others) through his own ethnography (fieldwork that he carried out in Wanet, Yorkshire, Northern England), while trying to further his own understanding by transposing it in and through the texts.

The author sees humanism as his basic starting point (attributing to it the "heroic" qualities), both regarding humanistic anthropology and humanistic literature, so

(...) this book represents an attempt to demonstrate a correspondence between Anthropology and Literature, between the writing, the individual authoring, the anthropological texts (monographs, papers, treatises) and literary ones (novels, short stories, essays). And the logic of this correspondence is that reading the work of E. M. Forster causes me to come to a certain understanding of my anthropological experiences in the rural English village of Wanet, while reading

through my own work on Wanet leads me to a certain appreciation of Forster. (p. ix ff.)

Of course, Rapport is well aware that he is stepping onto the uncharted territory — trying to bring together disciplines (or different epistemologies) that were essentially understood to be separate and distinct is not a small task. But he is certainly not an essentialist — after referring to several major anthropologists on the links between two separate fields, the author notes that to talk (or write) about them “is to talk of similarities and divergences — perceived, claimed, intended, wished-for — between two modern, Western disciplines of study; also two genres of writing” (p. 15). In looking at these two fields, Rapport also looks at different (but, for him, translatable) ways of constructing of the social reality. The main characteristic of Forster (as well as Mill, Simmel, Leach and Geertz) is that he sees (and constructs) this reality from a generally humanistic, non-essentialist, edifying (here Rapport refers to Rorty) perspective. While 19th-century Britain did not produce thinkers of the stature of Marx, Durkheim or Weber, it did produce a number of authors (Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, etc.) who provided social commentaries and critique. It is in this tradition that Forster continues, primarily through his novels. [page 60]

After a discussion of the personal background that has to do with his “discovery” of Forster and his liberal humanism, Nigel Rapport goes as far as to describe Forster in a way as a “post-modern” (p. 62), since “it is easy for me to discover Forster talking with a present-day voice.” This “postmodernity”^[5] presents an important aspect of the book, especially taking into account Rapport’s method of “zigzagging” (or switching codes) from Forster (literature) to ethnography and back. Obviously,

depending on one's perspective, this code switching can either be charming and persuasive or highly irritating, just like Rapport's recent reading of the anthropology of Britain (Rapport 2000). His simple (and occasionally self-evident) portrayal of the aspects of anthropology that could be studied in Britain ("anthropology at home") has provoked first an angry response by his St. Andrews colleague, Declan Quigley (Quigley 2000), and then some other rather peculiar (mis)readings. However, I would attribute this primarily to the internal squabbling within the British academia – I found it quite difficult to take Quigley's arguments seriously.[\[6\]](#)

Rapport's next book, *Transcendent Individual*, presented a series of articles whose aim was again to situate the individual from a liberal, humanist, perspective, in the study of contemporary societies. But how do we ever come to know what "an individual experience" might be? Here we get to a process that includes both invention and imagination (for example, pp. 32-35), a process that essentially looks at life as a work of art (following Bateson).[\[7\]](#)

In introducing these and similar categories Rapport also exposes himself to criticisms for introducing the categories characteristic for a certain (western, liberal, humanistic, post-Enlightenment) type of discourse. His idea of subject is basically the idea of the enlightened subject, of the free individual that is fully aware of the consequences of his or her actions, and thus could be held fully accountable. This idea of the individual western rational subject will certainly look very unfamiliar to scholars doing research in undeveloped (or Third World) countries. However, in all fairness, it should be said that Rapport speaks (writes) from a western, liberal, humanistic perspective — thus situating himself squarely within his proposed area of work and discussion. He

does not take his categories into the quest for interpreting or explaining the “noble savage” — although he seems to believe that they are applicable in a wider sense. Rapport’s work is also an “anthropology of anthropology” — but more self-consciously positioned as such.

CONCLUSION: THE INTERSUBJECTIVE INDIVIDUAL

The “Intersubjective turn” in contemporary anthropology postulates a series of categories that should enable anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists, social scientists, students of culture, as well as interested individuals to understand the world (and their own place within it) through a series of relationships.

Theserelationshipsinturn [page 61]

depend on the categories that should make them translatable/analyzable — which complicates things a bit.

The main problem with the “phenomenological anthropology” methodology as represented by Michael Jackson is the attempt to invent and utilize western categories and descriptions (based on over two thousand years of development of western philosophies) in describing non-western peoples, cultures and modes of behavior. Mauss was already aware of the limitations of this way of interpreting. This mode of interpreting is interesting, but I believe its informative value to be quite low.

On the other hand, the “literary and liberal anthropology” as outlined by Nigel Rapport, while sharing some of the (universalist and categorical) problems of the

phenomenological approach, is still situated within a western (mostly academic, but also literary, poetic, rural, etc.) milieu, which makes its own categories and translations more applicable to the realities it tries to interpret. Of course, the very use of concepts such as “liberalism” (or “human rights,” “agency,” “meta-experience,” “cultural grammar,” “social-scientific method” — to name just a few from Rapport 1997: 11) could be seen as highly problematic (and universalizing and totalizing), but, in the end, it is our own series of concepts and relationships from which we speak and write. *For whom* do we speak and write is a completely different question.

In the world of rapidly changing notions of person and self, new concepts that relate to individuality and relationships are necessary. How will these new concepts be constructed (and how the constructs utilized) is impossible to predict. However, it seems clear that different notions such as “self,” “person,” or “individual” should primarily be used within specific contexts (that is to say, the categorical apparatus where they have originated). Extending their use beyond their “proper” context can result in confusion and complete misunderstanding. It seems to me that both the “phenomenological” and “literary and liberal” approach offer some interesting insights and both could be used (in various ways, I am clearly much closer to the “literary and liberal” one) in interpreting (decoding) different native categories and sets of relationships. I would argue that anthropologists should go back to the basics (in the old-fashioned, Malinowskian way: fieldwork), try to understand what is it that the “natives” are actually doing and saying, and only then try to translate it into our (academic, scholarly, literary) discourse. When the “natives” are anthropologists themselves things seem easy (Jackson, Geertz), but let us try to *look* and *listen* first, and *interpret* later. [page 62]

ENDNOTES

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[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.

[2] Which is of course the way I see them — it could be argued that Jackson is very strong in theory, and that Rapport is in ethnography (for the latter, for example, Rapport 1997d).

[3] "Thus it is that individuals must be the measure of moral action, the benchmark of justice in society, the foundation of cultural value, and their bodiliness unite the world in a common liberal morality" (Rapport 1997: 201).

[4] Cf. Geertz 1973: 19.

[5] For Rapport, "postmodernity" means questioning the "grand" (or "meta-") narratives (following up on the lines of Rorty and Lyotard) and established preconceptions and prejudices (on the lines of Foucault).

[6] These arguments boil down to the statement that one could do anthropological research only in the “developing” (or Third World) societies, and that anyone disagreeing with this is a dangerous fanatic.

[7] Bateson has been a lasting and very strong influence in Rapport’s work (for example, Rapport 1999 and 1997c). [page 63]

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