

COMUNICACIONES

Bridging the Cultural Gap – Anthropology and Hermeneutics

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In Gadamer's philosophy, the idea of *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*, of consciousness affected by history and language, is the mark of the finitude of understanding, but also of its possibility. Through immersion in tradition and in the history of its effects, understanding takes place as an application of the past to present concerns, in such a way that past and present become fused in a new and wider horizon of knowledge.

These central ideas of hermeneutic philosophy can be, however, a serious obstacle to a hermeneutical anthropology, given the non-continuity, and sometimes radical difference, between the horizons anthropology intends to bridge. Is it possible to understand worlds whose history, language and worldview are completely foreign to our own? And, in that case, how can we overcome the different effects of their respective traditions?

Obviously enough, the answer given by anthropology to this fundamental question has been an affirmative one, and the history of the discipline is in a certain sense the history of the ways through which anthropologists tried to fulfill such promise. To achieve it, they adopted and developed a methodological strategy (whether functionalist, structuralist, cognitivist or materialist) which, regardless of its details and labels, always constituted a *modus operandi* for contextualizing the part (a given belief, idea, ritual, myth or institution) in the cultural whole to which it belongs – a whole defined, according to cultural relativist principles, by its overall semantic and cognitive coherence. Thus husband and wife conflicts were explained as a consequence of the contradiction between social rules of residence and descent, cannibalism as a result of protein deficit, the Oedipus myth as an unconscious synthesis between contradictory ideas concerning human origins, and magic as the result of fundamental associationist principles of human thought.

Anthropologists of this kind (we may call them “modern anthropologists”) were objectivists with a hermeneutic soul, but who never discovered that soul. Without knowing it, they were in the twentieth century an anthropological version of the Romantic hermeneutists, Schleiermacher and Dilthey embodied in ethnographers anxious to capture through a methodological device, not the authors' intended meaning and intentions, but, what amounts to the same, “the native point of view”, “his vision of his world”. For them, as modernists, the native point of view was, however, just an intermediate step towards the overall goal of explaining the particular idea or belief by reference to some kind of universal principle, or explanatory law.

Such a strategy remained dominant for a long period, until in the seventies some anthropologists (“post-modern anthropologists”) gave a negative answer to the same question, embracing an extreme cultural and epistemological relativism. Science was, for them, just one worldview among others, and their refusal of the scientific ideal of their predecessors was also a refusal of the idea that we can find a language through which local beliefs and ideas could be transcended so as to reveal some kind of non-local and non-parochial, universal, truth. The main support of their critique of modernist anthropology was an “interpretive turn”, through which hermeneutics became a central

term in post-modernist anthropological discourse. From then on it was acknowledged that the object of anthropology is not a collection of “facts” but an interpretive reality, a “web of meanings” (in Geertz’s famous expression) which themselves require an interpretive strategy.

But despite the presumption of a radical rupture between post-modernists and modernists, a substantial continuity was maintained between them. Such continuity reveals a structural characteristic of anthropology, so structural that it persisted through the momentous change post-modernists intended to bring about. We are talking here about something that we can describe as the central aspect of the anthropologist’s professional ideology – anti-ethnocentrism. Assuming that taking any aspect of their own culture as the referent for the evaluation of foreign ideas inevitably entailed an ethnocentric devaluation of those same ideas, post-modernist anthropologists, like their modernist predecessors, condemned themselves to a continuous practice of contextualization, through which what seemed absurd became plausible, what seemed illogical became logical, what seemed irrational became only apparently so. Such change in the evaluation of foreign ideas and customs was made possible by the trick of adding to the plausible, the logical and the rational one of two sentences: “according to local terms”, or “considered as a part of the whole to which it belongs”. If we follow the interpretive turn of the post-modernists, this “whole” is a “text” to be thickly described and densely interpreted; for their modernist predecessors, this “whole” was a “social organism”, a linguistic or cognitive structure, or a “cultural pattern”. But these are just terminological differences that should not hide the anthropological propensity to charitable interpretation, its inner impetus to justify the other’s beliefs in what we, in the end, cannot believe.

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At this point we must turn our attention to hermeneutics – to Gadamerian hermeneutics. As we know, Gadamer intended his constructive argument to be an attack on Romantic hermeneutics and on a historical consciousness contaminated by the methodological ideal. As he showed, Schleiermacher’s and Dilthey’s ideal of a methodological interpretation of the past entailed the impossibility of understanding that past in an authentic way. In a sense, for Gadamer such an ideal entailed the falsification of the past.

As he says:

The text that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim to be saying something true. We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint – i.e., transpose ourselves into the historical situation and try to reconstruct the historical horizon. In fact, however, we have given up the claim to find in the past any truth that is valid and intelligible for ourselves. Acknowledging the otherness of the other in this way, making him the object of objective knowledge, involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth (Gadamer, 1961, p. 303-4).

Every word of this quotation can be transposed to anthropology. As we tried to show, anthropologists, modern or post-modern, were clones of the Romantic hermeneutists. They looked to what is foreign in order to find in it what is opaque, weird, not understandable, impossible to fit into what we can accept as plausible or

realistic, as “true” in the sense we think something deserves to be so judged by our own standards. Guided by the *a priori* refusal of ethnocentrism, trying to overcome every prejudice in order to escape the particularity and contingency of their viewpoint, trying to understand everything “culturally”, anthropologists were unable to acknowledge the simple fact that we can learn from others only if we can become their conversational partners, and that we can become so only when we can share with them an agreement concerning the relevance of some question or subject of reflection. Refusing to “impose enough of our problems and vocabulary on the dead [or the “primitives”] to make them conversational partners, they confined their interpretive activity to making their falsehoods look less silly by placing them in the context of the benighted times in which they were written” (Rorty, 1998, p. 247).

If we choose the last option (making their falsehoods look less silly by placing them in the context of the benighted times and places in which they were written or said), assuming that each culture can be understood only in its own and particular terms, the resulting picture of global human diversity will be a pointillist universe of monads without windows, condemned to an essential incommunicability.

Anthropologists, as before them Spinoza, Schleiermacher and Dilthey, separated truth from meaning and bracketed truth in order to find meanings – meanings that we can find precisely on condition that we give up the search for truth. Paradoxically, anthropology thus disconnected each human world from every other world, created walls instead of bridges, encircling each horizon in such a way that none of them was, apparently, able to bring about a fusion with any other horizon, to operate the assimilation, integration and appropriation which are the mark, and condition, of true understanding.

Contemporary hermeneutics permits a radical shift in anthropologists’ self-understanding of their own discipline, of its aims and strategies, and in the future, I believe, Gadamer’s hermeneutics will contribute to a paradigm shift in the discipline, the same shift that Heidegger and Gadamer, taking their inspiration from Hegel and not from Schleiermacher and Dilthey, introduced in the way we look at history - not as a relic to be understood historically but as something that exerts a true claim on us. We must wait for the future and see.

But to think about the relationship between anthropology and hermeneutics is also a fruitful way of thinking about hermeneutics, and this will be my final, and very brief, point. Like modernist anthropologists, I believe that the answer to the question concerning the possibility of understanding other cultures is a vehement yes, although living in post-positivist times I cannot agree that method is the condition of such understanding. As we know and hermeneutics teaches us, the non-methodological dimensions of common sense, tact, judgment, humanistic education, and imagination are enough for that – and ensured that anthropology as ethnography and independently of its theoretical and methodological self-understanding was sometimes able to show the magnificence of others understanding of being.

But can anthropology and the specificity of its challenges contribute, however modestly, to deepen the way in which hermeneutics conceives itself?

I should say yes, for the simple reason that Gadamer's hermeneutics, and hermeneutics in general, despite its universality claims, are characterized by a kind of centripetal obsession - hermeneutics always looks inwards, to ourselves, to our past, to our identity in its relation to tradition. It is very hard to find in any of the major works of contemporary hermeneutics a reflection about something which is not internal to our historical identity.

But if it is indeed true that, at least sometimes, it is possible to understand other cultures in an authentic way, we must recognize that history and commonality of tradition may be a condition, but not a necessary condition of understanding. That is, anthropology shows that underlying comprehension there must be something more powerful than belonging to the same tradition, that underlying the effects of history and language other effects are present – as in the end hermeneutics also knows when faces (as Gadamer faces in the third and final part of *Truth and Method*) its ontological dimensions.

And there are indeed other effects than those of history, and these are the plain and ontological effects of being, irrespectively of identity or difference of place and history, human. Beyond superficial variations of time and place, or the details of different world-views and beliefs, to be human is to be concerned with what it is to be human, to be a man, a woman, an animal or a god, with what is good and what is evil, with nature, language, time, desire and death. Common subjects of reflection, universal subjects of reflection that no human being has ever ignored, and which, notwithstanding the astonishing variety of cultures, left behind – materialized in texts (written or oral), cosmologies, temples, rituals, or simply in action – an immense landscape where anthropology sought inspiration and where a promise of *Bildung* can be fulfilled irrespectively of a commonality of tradition that hermeneutics tends to consider in its practice as a condition of understanding.

After all, as Gadamer said, "to recognize one's own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of spirit, whose being consists only in returning to itself from what is other".

Like history, like art, like travel, but maybe more so, anthropology, because of its curiosity and fascination with worlds which are different from our own, offers the possibility of a deep movement of the spirit - and its possibilities as a learning experience are immense.

Bibliographic References

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