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## Is a Peripheral Anthropology Possible? The Issue of Universalism<sup>1</sup>

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### Center and Periphery

In this article, I address the question of whether it is possible to practice anthropology at the periphery of the center. This center—principally represented today by the United States—is the heart of not only the global political, financial, and economic system, but also of scientific production, which, more and more, passes through the English language, notably in the politics of publication. Even the French tradition, which at one point managed to represent a kind of hegemony alongside the Anglo-American tradition, now finds itself to a certain extent marginalized with respect to the latter. Indeed, the issue has always been the practice of anthropology which proceeds from a central ideological and practical framework whence the anthropologist casts his or her eye over the periphery that constitutes the field of research. And now that the discipline of anthropology is being generalized to the periphery that heretofore served as its primary object, it is all the more urgent to ask what kind of anthropology could be done, both proceeding from the “center” and proceeding from the “periphery of the center” (Daveluy and Dorais 2009).<sup>2</sup>

My point of departure is the idea that comparison—which is essential to the discipline—is not possible outside a hegemonic context. Comparison is more complicated than simply establishing a correlation between two neutral terms, “them” and “us.” As the French anthropologist Louis Dumont has shown, comparison establishes a correlation between “them” and those of “us” who talk about them, so that when we speak of the universal, we always speak from our point of view (Dumont 1986). A universalism that pretends to be universal is at the same time particular.<sup>3</sup>

We know from postmodern criticism—notably in the work of James Clifford—that the textuality of anthropology, in whatever form, cannot escape the political, ethical, and epistemological conditions of its production (Clifford 1986). We also know that even the dialogical methodologies that were developed partly in response to this problem left intact the basic configuration of power-knowledge upon which the discipline rests as an institution connected to other Western institutions, as an academic activity rooted “in a possibility that properly belongs to the history of our culture,” to quote Foucault’s observation in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Foucault 2005). The anthropologist is the one who charts the ethnographic relationships and textualizes the monograph, and from the moment the “natives” are constructed as informants, their “voices” are already formatted. When writing is the strategy, dialogue cannot escape textualization (Hastrup 1993). And what of the call

for “indigenous” or “local” anthropology, which some would consider a satisfactory response to the problem of hegemony? How does such an anthropology articulate with the universalist system of reference, which is a precondition for the very possibility of anthropological discourse?

### **As Many Anthropologies as Cultures?**

By way of developing my argument, I begin by asking whether one can postulate the existence of as many universalisms as there are cultures. To speak of the contemporary world, would there be, for example, a Muslim universalism, a Chinese, a Buddhist, or a Hindu universalism, or something along these lines?

No doubt some see this as a real possibility. For example, consider what was called “Islamic anthropology” in the Anglo-American literature of the 1980s and 90s (Ahmed 1984, 1986; Tapper 1995). Even if it seems to have run out of steam (it is still promoted by some [Mondal 2008]),<sup>4</sup> it nevertheless poses basic epistemological questions that illustrate the point I am trying to make. This is all the more pertinent now that we are hearing calls from other parts of the world for an African, Latin American, or Arab anthropology, and even for a Japanese or Indian anthropology. For my purposes in this article, I shall focus on so-called Islamic anthropology.

A first criticism of this trend is that it failed to problematize the notion of universalism that it still put forward to justify such an anthropology. It was enough for this trend to simply assert that Islam is based on the universal quest for truth and that, as such, it is an analytical point of view as legitimate as, if not more than, the “Western anthropology” that is marked by colonialism and ethnocentrism. The proponents of Islamic anthropology saw no need to further define the universalist reference they claimed to embrace, nor to reflect on the notion of Islam itself: is there one single Islam, and if so, which one? Besides which, how would this universalist reference integrate other traditions?

The proposed Islamic anthropology seems to have arisen from the same epistemological weakness and ideological delusion as a certain Anglo-American multicultural trend. In the name of respecting the voices of others, we ended up with a juxtaposition of cultures that risks consigning them all to particularisms, more invented than observed, while overlooking the claims of some in order to be in possession of the “true” universalist reference.

In his laudable concern to rejuvenate anthropology and open it up to “non-Western intellectual sources”—a concern still rarely seen among anthropologists who come from the “center,” I might add—Jonathan Benthall, who edited *Anthropology Today* (published by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain) during the 1990s, showed a tendency, in my view, to “confessionalize” the discipline by pointing out the respective “origins” of the authors he referenced in a critical clarification (Benthall 1996). Thus, in their respective critical anthropologies, Veena Das, of Indian origin,<sup>5</sup> would be inspired by the Sanskrit tradition; Gananath Obeyesekere, of Sri Lankan origin,<sup>6</sup> by Buddhism; and myself, of Tunisian origin,<sup>7</sup> by the Islamic tradition.<sup>8</sup>

If one were to adopt such a “multicultural” perspective, one might think that Obeyesekere was likewise confessionalizing the discipline in his critique of Marshall Sahlins’ analysis of Pacific Islander history as being based upon an ethnocentrism rooted in Western thought (Obeyesekere 2003, 2009; Sahlins 2003). Yet it seems to me that the critic was not trying to highlight Sahlins’ intrinsic membership in the Christian Protestant tradition, that is, to point out an essential cultural belonging. Rather, what he was trying to bring out was the interpretive bias (to the extent that it could be demonstrated) that ensued from the uncritical use of the category of myth, which, according to the critic, was inappropriate for the purpose of interpreting historical Polynesian societies of the late nineteenth century. Obeyesekere’s critique was strictly focused on the relevance of the American anthropologist’s explanatory model, and not on any religious or cultural affiliation.

The question we would ask Jonathan Benthall or anyone who might follow such a line of reasoning—though it should be noted that the British anthropologist has not built a school around it—is why anyone should feel obliged to establish a close connection between the formulation of a position that is critical or dissident with respect to mainstream anthropology—a position that in and of itself is more than welcome—and the author’s “religious” or “cultural” origin? Must we accept that there can be as many “anthropologies” as there are “cultures”? More to the point, does such a connection hold up when the anthropologist belongs to a Western hegemonic tradition? For example, when Benthall detected the influence of Buddhist thought in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, rather than associating it with a “Buddhist anthropology,” he implicitly suggests that the Buddhist influence was rather the result of the great French thinker’s personal philosophical choice (Benthall 1996). In other words, one could be led to think that Lévi-Strauss had a certain freedom of thought which he owed not to his cultural or religious “origin” but to his intrinsic quality as a universal thinker, unless this latter quality derived from a specifically “Western origin.”

In contrast, Benthall seems to have assumed that my own critical approach to the universalist basis of anthropological discourse must necessarily be mediated by my supposed affiliation with the Islamic tradition. That is not my position. On the contrary, I position myself within the context of “Western” anthropological universalism because, in my estimate, practically all scientific discourse on cultural diversity, wherever it is produced, is inscribed within this system of reference. This does not prevent me from discussing, problematizing and subverting it. On the contrary, thus transformed, the system will be eminently useful as the place from which I speak and from which I attempt to critically integrate the various traditions with a view toward developing a common, if not a universal, anthropological language.

### **Toward a Critical Universalism**

This is how I intend my critique, for example, of the universalist metaphysics underlying French anthropology, indeed underlying a good part of francophone anthropology. In several articles, I have interrogated the republican conception that undergirds it. This

conception is essentially based on an abstraction of the citizen and the principle of assimilation, thereby distinguishing it from American and British universalisms even while sharing numerous points in common. I went on to discuss how this conceptual model has offered a hegemonic representation of historical and sociological experience (purified of multiplicity and variety) as a universal system of reference to eclipse all other traditions (Kilani 1993, 2003, 2009).

Let us consider the example of how French anthropology has dealt with (or not) the question of the “Muslim veil” or the “neighborhoods” (*quartiers*, a euphemism for suburbs populated by immigrants) in the context of the republican model of integration. This model, which postulates equality for all in the public sphere, has failed to consider the global processes of discrimination that characterize French society and that contribute to hierarchically ordering and stigmatizing certain groups. Likewise, inequality between men and women has been seen (in the context of the same “French particularism”) as merely an effect of the delayed realization of the principle of equality enshrined in the republican model, which automatically removes the subordinate relation of the “feminine” to the “masculine” specific to the patriarchal structure from the field of the thinkable (Kilani 2009).

This critical effort is part of the laborious work of deconstructing and reconstructing the discipline. At the very least, it quashes any abstract universalism, and any claim for a “consensual multicultural anthropology” to which the various traditions would supposedly contribute equally. Such a “multicultural anthropology” avoids studying the hegemonic order that necessarily encompasses the various traditions and that, as such, has a role in their hierarchical organization. By juxtaposing the various groups or cultures without considering their relationship to the overall organizing principle that—for one reason or another, be it regional, national or global, be it cultural, political or religious—obeys a hierarchical order, a “multicultural anthropology” can obscure not only the relationship of domination, but also the universalist system of reference from which the anthropologist speaks.

My approach resonates with Ernesto De Martino’s idea of “critical ethnocentrism” which says that “an absolutely non-ethnocentric point of view is theoretical nonsense and a practical impossibility, since it would be equivalent to stepping outside of history in order to contemplate every culture, including Western culture” (Martino 1977:397; Rivera 2009:83).<sup>9</sup> The Italian anthropologist always mistrusted the naïveté of radical relativism that remains the preserve of certain contemporary postmodernists. According to De Martino, the idea of rejecting the Western universalistic point of view—or, I would add, any particular universalism—amounts to taking a point of view in a metaphysical dimension, that is, “adopting God’s point of view,” which would distort any analysis. Yet this is precisely the inconsequential claim of the classic universalist position that fails to question the origins of its own practical and metaphysical foundation or the place from which it is formulated. In other words, universalism and relativism here join together to obscure their operating conditions, that is, the particular point of view from which they emerge.

But that doesn’t mean that we are reduced to theoretical paralysis. Anthropologists

owe it to themselves to reflect upon the universe that contains the particular history to which they belong, which is, after all, the history of only a fraction of humanity, whichever fraction that may be. Such a heuristic approach allows the anthropologist to focus on the unexamined assumptions in those categories of thought in which this particular history, this particular universalism—in this case, Western history, or more precisely, Western universalism—has precipitated and built up a sedimentary ground. We must remember that it is on the basis of such a universalism that anthropological discourse has been built, and has even become possible; at the same time, we must not forget to take into account the various critical readjustments that have been and continue to be made to it (here, I am referring in particular to the critique of various forms of evolutionist or relativist theories or those based on utilitarianist or cognitivist reasoning).

In other words, it is not a question of claiming to divest oneself of any universalist reference, but rather of taking it on, both as a political necessity and an epistemological requirement, of taking it on in its very deficiency and to the extent of its limitations.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> See also Michelle Daveluy and Louis-Jacques Dorais, eds, (2009) *À la périphérie du centre: Les limites de l'hégémonie en anthropologie* (Montréal, Liber). The book address the question of whether it is possible for researchers working at the margins of the hegemonic centers of anthropology—represented primarily by the USA and secondarily by Great Britain and, to a lesser extent, France—to influence the discipline. It also discuss the degree to which these hegemonies determine the epistemological paradigms and theoretical problematics of those anthropologists who belong to the “periphery of the center.”

<sup>3</sup> Gender studies give evidence of the same epistemological preoccupation when they point out that in most cultures the masculine is used for both the particular (man, *vir*) and the general (human, *homo*). See Pierre Bourdieu (1990) “La domination masculine,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 84:3–31, and Colette Guillaumin (2005) *L'Idéologie raciste. Genèse et langage actuel* (Paris, La Haye: Mouton).

<sup>4</sup> This reference was suggested to me by the reviewer, thanks to her or him.

<sup>5</sup> Veena Das is Professor of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University. She specializes in the anthropology of India and medical anthropology.

<sup>6</sup> Gananath Obeyesekere is Emeritus Professor at Princeton University. His research interests include symbolic anthropology and psychoanalysis.

<sup>7</sup> I am Professor of Anthropology at the University of Lausanne. My research interests, in addition to ethnicity, sacrifice and violence, include the history and the epistemology of the discipline.

<sup>8</sup> Concerning Veena Das and myself, Jonathan Benthall wrote the following in “From Self-Appraise through Self-Criticism to Self-Confidence,” in *The Future of Anthropology* (1995) Akbar S. Ahmed and Cris N. Shore, eds. P. 9. (London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Athlone): “Finally, as Western technological rationality allied to consumerism spreads all over the planet, it is likely that anthropology will seek to maintain its independence of approach through refreshing itself more open-mindedly from non-Western intellectual sources. A hint of this trend is given by Mondher Kilani, who looks to Islam as an alternative universalism, for this kind of critical stimulus; but Veena Das, for instance, has been inspired by the Sanskritic tradition, and a number of well-known anthropologists either are Buddhists or have been influenced by Buddhist thought.” See also Benthall, “The Religious Provenances of Anthropologists.” In a personal communication (March 1995) concerning Obeyesekere, and after mentioning Veena Das again (“the Indian anthropologist who has been inspired by Sanskritic texts”), Benthall stated, “There are also a number of Buddhist anthropologists, including perhaps most prominently Obeyesekere though I cannot recall that he has written on the influence of Buddhism on his own thinking.”

<sup>9</sup> More specifically, De Martino wrote, “On one hand... it is impossible to say anything about the meaning of *ethnic* cultures unless one engages with the meaning of Western civilization; on the other hand, it is precisely this meaning, once recognized and explained, that opens up a dialogue with the meaning of other cultures to the extent that it is based on the assumption of a common humanity” (De Martino 1997:395, quoted in Annamaria Rivera 2009:83).

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