10 Interpretive and postmodernist approaches

After Radcliffe-Brown's death in 1955, British anthropology went in four different directions. Some in the next generation simply continued Radcliffe-Brown's line of enquiry (notably Fortes and to some extent Goody). Others, such as Firth, came to emphasize individual action over social structure – an approach drawn partly from Malinowski's early fieldwork-based version of functionalism (chapter 5). This line of thought developed into theories such as processualism and transactionalism (chapter 6). Still others took to at least some of Lévi-Strauss' structuralist ideas (chapter 8), often adapting them to new interests in social process. Finally, a large number came eventually to follow Evans-Pritchard in his rejection of the idea of anthropology as a science, in favour of an interpretive approach which placed anthropology firmly within the humanities.

In the United States, Clifford Geertz began to propound his own style of interpretivism. Anthropology in his hands (and in Evans-Pritchard's) turned the linguistic analogy sideways. Cultures were no longer metaphorical 'grammars' to be figured out and written down; they were 'languages' to be translated into terms intelligible to members of other cultures – or more often than not, the anthropologist's own culture.

In France, outside anthropology, structuralism was under attack as the last bastion of 'modernism'. Philosophers and literary critics there and their followers in North America developed new, 'postmodern' ways of looking at the world. To a great extent, this followed from the idea that the world itself had undergone a quiet revolution. The world had moved beyond modernism, with its hierarchy of knowledge, to a postmodern phase where there was no place for grand theory of any kind (except, a cynic might say, postmodernism itself).

These ideas filtered into anthropology in the late 1970s and early 1980s. There were also developments within our discipline which made it more open to postmodernist ideas. The interpretivism already present served as a foundation – as did latter-day attacks on the alleged colonial mentality and imperialist foundation of anthropology. In the same time period,

feminist anthropology grew and further challenged androcentric models, reflexivity became a byword of ethnographic method, and writing and reading took on theoretical significance in the new, literarily aware anthropology. All this culminated in the publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), and in the eyes of some the discipline was born again.

This chapter focuses on these various strands of thinking. While Evans-Pritchard may be thought of as a thoroughly modernist practitioner of the discipline, his ideas nevertheless foreshadow interpretivism. The eventual move towards postmodernism in the hands of Edwin Ardener and others at Oxford, Evans-Pritchard's old university, lies within the Evans-Pritchardian tradition, or at least possesses a spirit which Evans-Pritchard would have recognized as his own (see chapter 9). At the other extreme, *Writing Culture* signalled a focus on the 'poetics and politics' of writing ethnography. What these strands have in common is a vision of anthropology as a rejection of scientific method, a recognition of the importance of writing, and an attempt to gain insight through human understanding rather than formal methods of research and analysis. In spite of their diversity, it is therefore quite appropriate to see all these threads of interpretive and postmodernist thinking as part of one great movement within the discipline – a movement that all of us have been influenced by, however much some may wish to distance themselves from it.

Evans-Pritchard's interpretive approach

E. E. Evans-Pritchard studied under C. G. Seligman and Bronislaw Malinowski at the London School of Economics. He made six major field expeditions to the Sudan and British East Africa, notably with the Zande (Azande), Nuer, Anuak, Shilluk, and Luo. His accounts of Zande witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1937) and Nuer politics and kinship (1940; 1951a) served both to epitomize the British anthropology of their time and to inspire succeeding generations – albeit more on a theoretical than an ethnographic level. In recent years, some of his Nuer work, based on less than a year with the people, has been the subject of criticism for overstating the importance of the lineage in political affairs (e.g., Kuper 1988: 194–201). However, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Evans-Pritchard 1937) and *Nuer Religion* (1956) have fared better. Both of these were attempts to understand and relate the inner thoughts of his subjects.

Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic is an ethnography of Zande thought processes. The author argues that Zande are so obsessed with witchcraft

that to understand their belief in it and how that belief is used to explain cause and effect is to understand their society. If a grain storage bin falls and kills someone sitting under it, one cause may well be that termites have eaten the supports, but the question of why it fell at that time on that person must be answered by whose witchcraft is involved (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 69–72).

Nuer Religion concerns, among other things, the definition of *kwoth*. Like Latin *spiritus*, Greek *pneuma*, and Hebrew *ruah*, it also designates 'breath'. In its metaphorical senses, it can refer to spirits of several kinds, including the Nuer entity Evans-Pritchard translates as 'God'. Throughout *Nuer Religion*, the author engages his reader in an exercise to picture and feel the essence of Nuer belief through the words, the symbolism, and the rituals which characterize the system described by the title of that book. It is worth remembering, though, that 'Nuer religion' is not itself a Nuer concept; it is an anthropologist's one (see Evans-Pritchard 1956: 311–22). Evans-Pritchard's monograph, together with a similar one by his colleague Godfrey Lienhardt (1963) on the religion of the neighbouring Dinka, formed the foundation of anthropological studies of belief. They also focused attention on translation, both real and metaphorical. It is interesting that whereas Evans-Pritchard speaks of 'God' and 'spirits' and often uses the Nuer term, Lienhardt prefers the English 'Divinity' and 'divinities' – precisely in order to get away from the directness of the more familiar English terms. It may also be worthy of note that both these Oxford anthropologists converted to Roman Catholicism; and this, it has been said, might have played some part in the formulation of their similar approaches to the interpretation of religious belief and practice.

Evans-Pritchard practised his anthropology within the general theoretical framework of Radcliffe-Brown. However, he rejected Radcliffe-Brown's notion of the discipline as a science and argued the case for anthropology as an art (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1965). This marks the crucial difference between Evans-Pritchard's vision and the mainstream British tradition from which it diverged. Especially in his later years, Evans-Pritchard developed the idea of anthropology as 'translation of culture', and this became a catch-phrase in the works of many of his students. What anthropologists are supposed to do is get as close as possible to the collective mind of the people they study, and then 'translate' the alien ideas they find into equivalent ideas within their own culture. This is, of course, not the same thing as actual, linguistic translation. Like Radcliffe-Brown's sea shells and Lévi-Strauss' crystals, it is an analogy (see chapters 5 and 8). Evans-Pritchard rejected the Lévi-Straussian idea of a 'grammar' of culture in favour of a 'meaning' in the more subtle everyday discourse of culture. The difficulties of translation

(whether to go for a literal one, or an idiomatic one) have precise analogies in ethnography. If we translate Nuer or Zande ideas too literally, then no one outside of Nuerland or Zandeland will understand them. If we translate too idiomatically, then we will fail to capture the essence of Nuer or Zande thought. Anthropology, according to this view, is forever caught in the translator's dilemma.

In his 1951 textbook *Social Anthropology*, derived from a series of six lectures presented on BBC Radio, Evans-Pritchard reviews the scope of social anthropology, its history, methods, and theory, and its potential for applied work. At several points Evans-Pritchard (e.g., 1951b: 62, 116-17) criticizes the 'natural science' analogy and offers instead the vision of anthropology's object as the totality of moral and symbolic systems, which in his view are quite unlike any systems found in nature. They are not governed by natural laws, though they do entail social structures and cultural patterns. Was Evans-Pritchard a structural-functionalist masquerading as an epistemologist? Was he, until his bid for freedom in the 1950s, a philosopher-historian strapped into the straitjacket of functionalist dogma? Or did he simply change his mind, from history to functionalism to epistemology, in the course of his career?

Mary Douglas (1980: 29–38) suggests that Evans-Pritchard's career represented a single, coherent research programme and that he was always an interpretive thinker. Another view is that he broke with functionalism in the 1940s and consolidated his perspective in the 1950s (e.g., Kuper 1996 [1973]: 124–6). In support of Douglas' position, one can cite much in *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic* and point to the fact that the text of *Nuer Religion* is made up of papers written and presented up to a decade before its publication. However, Evans-Pritchard's ethnographic work is not all that different from that of any of his contemporaries. The ways in which it differs do not mark him out as having a unique methodological approach or understanding of society, but rather indicate a desire for innovation, especially in his concern with systems of belief. Radcliffe-Brown regarded Evans-Pritchard as one in the same mould as himself and feared that Meyer Fortes would be the rebel. Fortes, though, continued the Radcliffe-Brownian tradition at Cambridge, where it competed with Leach's structuralism and processualism for the favour of the students. Whatever elements of Evans-Pritchard's writing predate *Nuer Religion*, the publication of that book marks a departure from structural-functionalism towards a new kind of reasoning about the nature of religious belief. Evans-Pritchard recalls Durkheim more than he does Radcliffe-Brown, but the emphasis is more on seeing the spirit world as a Nuer sees it and explaining it as if to a Western theological audience, and rather less on demonstrating a relation between belief and social structure.

One of Evans-Pritchard's strongest statements against functionalism lies in his 1950 lecture, 'Social anthropology: past and present', published in his first series of collected essays (1962: 13–28). He argues that the failing of social anthropology since the Enlightenment has been to model the discipline on the natural sciences, and suggests that it is better seen as among the historical sciences or more generally as a branch of the humanities. The fact that historians' issues are generally diachronic, whereas anthropologists' are synchronic, does not bother him. The synthesis of events and the integrative description both aim at is enough for him to assert a methodological similarity. He says that the description of structural form is not antithetical to either history or anthropology. Likewise, 'History is not a succession of events, it is the links between them' (1962 [1961]: 48).

Evans-Pritchard's main influence was at Oxford, where he held the Chair of Social Anthropology from 1946 to 1970. Indeed, he still casts his spell over the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology there. It is his bust and not Radcliffe-Brown's or Tylor's which graces that institute's library, and his work which the Oxford tradition has carried forward. In the 1970s, when Oxford anthropology was polarized between Needham's latent structuralism and Ardener's incipient postmodernism, both sides took comfort in Evans-Pritchard's inspiration (see, e.g., Needham 1972: xiv, 14–31; Ardener 1989 [1971]: 35–9). Needham's struggle with the relation between the English word 'belief', the inner state it describes, and the cross-cultural applicability of the concept, is to a large measure attributable to the text of *Nuer Religion*.

Geertz's interpretivism

While Evans-Pritchard showed the way towards interpretivism, it is nevertheless a little harder to justify the appellation 'ism' to his approach than it is to that of Clifford Geertz. Evans-Pritchard's anthropology was, as much as anything, a reaction against the structural-functionalist enterprise, whereas Geertz's marks a positive move towards an understanding of the minutiae of culture as an end in itself.

Geertz, now based at Princeton, was trained at Harvard and has taught at Berkeley and Chicago. He did fieldwork on Java and Bali and in Morocco. His ethnographic work has been diverse in scope and approach. *The Religion of Java* (1960), for example, was fairly conventional, whereas *Kinship in Bali* (Geertz and Geertz 1975) challenges the idea of kinship as an autonomous system which can be understood cross-culturally and argues for its inclusion in a symbolic domain. *Agricultural Involution* (1963), in contrast to both, is in the broad framework of

Stewardian ecological anthropology, while some of his other work on social change in Indonesia lies in the realm of social history. In *Islam Observed* (1968), Geertz turns his attention to comparison, in an attempt to understand Islam in the context of two countries where he has ethnographic experience: Indonesia and Morocco. Unlike Evans-Pritchard (1965 [1963]: 13–36), he does not hold up 'the comparative method' as an impossibility!

The core of his interpretivist anthropology, though, lies in the introductory essay to his book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, which was completed and published in 1973 – the year of Evans-Pritchard's death. There Geertz (1973: 3–30) sums up his approach as one of 'thick description'. Anthropology is about picking through the strata embedded in a particular culture, and revealing them through layers of description. It is not about cognition as anthropologists in America then understood it; nor is it necessarily about large-scale comparison. Critics (e.g., Kuper 1999: 109–14) have pointed out the ambiguity of Geertz's definition of 'thick description' (as detailed and layered) as well as the thinness of some of his own ethnography (in that the sources of his own generalizations are seldom made clear). Yet Geertz's interpretivist challenge is, if in these ways problematic, nevertheless both deeper in ethnographic detail and richer in metaphor than Evans-Pritchard's.

In his two major collections, Geertz (1973; 1983) pushes for an image of society as 'like a text' – for Kuper (1999: 112) 'a metaphor running away with itself'. Geertz also argues for anthropology as the understanding of the 'local' in a tense interaction with the 'global', for an emphasis on the minutiae, even the trivia of culture, and for culture as a symbolic system, but a system within which social action takes place and political power is generated. He deconstructs common anthropological notions such as 'culture', 'worldview', 'art', 'custom', and 'customary law', with a fluency of style that is virtually unmatched. If he were a bad writer, he would undoubtedly have had less influence, but the effect of Geertz's subtle and skilful breaking-down of anthropological conceit and positivist tendencies has been profound. His collected essays are probably as much read outside the discipline as by anthropologists themselves, and (for better or worse) to many are paradigmatic of the discipline as a whole.

In some of his recent work, Geertz has ventured yet further into interpretivism through re-interpreting the ethnography of others. In his award-winning *Works and Lives* (Geertz 1988), he examines the writings of Evans-Pritchard, Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, and Benedict. Through the analysis of the imagery and metaphors of his chosen authors, Geertz argues that anthropology is simply 'a kind of writing'. This is a major postmodernist challenge to the discipline, and one which is

commonplace in the work of both American and French writers over the last two decades (see Clifford and Marcus 1986; Sperber 1985 [1982]). Jonathan Spencer (1989) has argued that Geertz and his followers are mistaken in the view that anthropological texts are merely pieces of writing. Spencer puts the case that anthropology is also 'a kind of working', and demonstrates the logic of putting both the ethnographer, and the diversity of points of view among informants, into the text. Yet whether Geertz's emphasis on writing is exaggerated or not, he has usefully focused attention on anthropology as a creative endeavour.

Today, Geertz remains as one of anthropology's most influential figures, both within and beyond the discipline. His interpretivism undoubtedly paved the way for postmodern anthropology. Some say he is not just a precursor but part of the movement. Before getting into the nuances of postmodernism proper, though, a focus on further foundations, especially with regard to new concepts and interests beyond those of Geertz himself, is worthwhile.

Concepts of changing times

The postmodernist challenge in anthropology has yielded new concepts and areas of new research associated with them. Among the most important are reflexivity and orientalism. Let us consider these with regard to the related concepts of reflexivism (which entails a theoretical emphasis on reflexivity), occidentalism, and globalization.

Reflexivity and reflexivism

All anthropologists do comparison of one kind or another. Those who work far from home might compare more to classic anthropological cases like Nuer or Trobriand society. Others argue that a better kind of comparison is that to societies which are similar, technologically, geographically, or linguistically (see chapter 4). Those who work in societies closely related to their own, either culturally or geographically, tend to make comparisons to their own society more explicit in their writings. At the extreme, there is explicit comparison of one's own culture, described through one's *self* as exemplar, and through the 'self' as vehicle imposed upon the culture purportedly described. In this case, the culture under description can become mere background for the anthropologist's exploration of his or her own cultural and social identity. This is a case of extreme reflexivity.

Reflexivity has formed a major part of the incipient postmodern project within anthropology since the 1970s. Perhaps the first explicit publication

in this mould is Judith Okely's essay, originally published in an early issue of the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 'The self and scientism' (Okely 1996 [1975]: 27–44). However, the roots of reflexivity are yet deeper. Malinowski's fieldwork diary, much commented on by Okely, is the best-known example. Although Malinowski apparently meant it only to record his own private musings, it found its way into print twenty-five years after his death (Malinowski 1967), and it contrasts sharply with his formal ethnographic accounts. In the diary he reveals his sexual fantasies, his heavy use of drugs, his distaste for some aspects of Trobriand culture, and his boredom in the Trobriand Islands. Malinowski's student Jomo Kenyatta, later the first president of Kenya, included reflexive comment in his ethnography of his own people (Kenyatta 1938), but most of the Malinowskians and the Boasians steered clear. Lévi-Strauss included much autobiography in *Tristes Tropiques* (1976 [1955]), though he too separated this from both his ethnographic and his theoretical commentaries. What makes the efforts of most postmodern writers fundamentally different is their assertion that reflexivity itself is ethnography, or at least a central part of it, and that ethnography is at least the major part of anthropological theory itself (see Rabinow 1977).

Reflexivity has strong links with feminist anthropology. Feminist anthropology and gender studies share much of their subject matter, but their approaches are somewhat different. Henrietta Moore (1988: 188) has written that the anthropology of gender is about 'the study of gender identity and its cultural construction', whereas feminist anthropology is about 'the study of gender as a principle of human social life' (see chapter 9). For the last couple of decades, anthropologists interested in the study of gender have moved decidedly away from this 'gender studies' approach to one emphasizing the position of woman as ethnographer as well as that of woman as informant or object. By the middle of the 1980s it was not uncommon for the anthropologist to put herself forward as the main subject of anthropological discourse, as reflexivity gained favour within postmodernist and especially (loosely) feminist circles, and ultimately found favour in anthropology at large (see, e.g., Okely and Callaway 1992). The danger of losing the 'other' for the emphasis on the 'self' became all too easy, as extreme reflexivity became at worst a fetish and at best a theoretical perspective (reflexivism) in its own right.

A further twist is found in the kind of study where the analyst, drawing on her own experiences, speaks for a wider community of oppressed people or attempts to give 'voice' to the oppressed through herself. Writers in this tradition sometimes take their inspiration from the poststructuralist, feminist literary theory of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and her 'subaltern studies' associates (see, e.g., Guha and Spivak 1988). Some

of Lila Abu-Lughod's writings on Bedouin women (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1990) are in this vein. The idea is that there is something shared among 'subaltern' or subordinate groups, whether subordination is on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, or history of colonial injustice. Sherry Ortner (1995), on the other hand, points to the Geertzian 'thinness' of work following this approach: a thinness derived from a reluctance to tackle internal politics and problems of representing the 'other' or indeed the (subaltern) self.

Other trends in the last decade have been towards moderation, either allowing personal reflexivity to mingle with reflections on theory, or pursuing the reflective experiences of the traditional objects of ethnography. The former is exemplified by Kirsten Hastrup's (1995) brilliant critique of anthropology's assumptions and directions. The latter includes Pat Caplan's (1997) record of her friendship with 'Mohammed', one of her informants, through the thirty years she has worked with the Swahili of Tanzania. Much of Caplan's text is made up of quotations, and the 'voice' of the informant is heard along with the confessions of the ethnographer. But there is 'fact' as well, especially on spirit cults; and a fine balance is achieved between ethnography and autobiography.

There is still another kind of reflexivity, though perhaps it is less recognized as such. This is the kind of reflexive study which examines not an individual but a collective self: anthropology as a whole, or perhaps a group of anthropologists who share a common interest or ethnographic region. What I have in mind is the kind of study which examines this collective self in interplay, not with individual informants, but with a culture built both of real happenings and of images portrayed through ethnography. A good example is Alcida Ramos' (1992) study of Yanomami ethnography. She remarks that anthropologists who have worked with the Yanomami groups in Brazil have variously presented them as being fierce, erotic, intellectual, or just plain exotic. In some ways, sometimes, they are all these things, but the imagery which has been built up around them is powerful. Ramos notes that media hype has exaggerated ethnographic description to such an extent that some ethnographers, notably Napoleon Chagnon, have been led to tone down new books and new editions of old books which have fuelled that flame.

Orientalism, occidentalism, and globalization

An important component of postmodern anthropology is the interest in power, derived from Foucault among others (see chapter 9). A related concern has been the identification of power as a manifestation of colonial and postcolonial discourses through 'orientalism'. The concept was in-

troduced by Edward Said, a Palestinian literary critic long resident in the United States. In *Orientalism* (1978) and later works, Said attacks the West for creating a notion of the East, the Orient, in order to dominate it, by trade, colonialism, and other forms of exploitation. The West, he says, more polemically, also needs the Orient in order to define itself: what is *not* East is West. Many of his more salient ideas were, in fact, anticipated by anthropologists (e.g., Asad 1973; cf. Goody 1996), who have also pointed out that anthropological studies, at least in colonial times, were embedded in unequal relationships between the West and the Third World. Said is implicitly critical of our discipline and its orientalist discourse, though his main grudges are directed at literary figures, philologists, and archaeologists.

However, recently some anthropologists have turned Said's argument on its head, not so much to negate it as to point out that it is only half the story. James Carrier of the University of Durham has edited a volume called *Occidentalism* (Carrier 1995a), in which nine mainly American anthropologists (some, including Carrier, trained in sociology) comment on the notion of 'the West'. Most of the contributors note that 'oriental' peoples are as likely to have biased and generalized visions of the West as 'occidental' peoples are of the East. Indeed, as Carrier points out in his preface, when he moved from sociology to anthropology, from a training concentrating on the nuances of social complexity in industrial capitalist societies of the West to a specialization in Melanesian society, he was startled by the lack of sophistication in the ways in which anthropologists talk about their own societies.

> It struck me at the time as a professional double standard, and it repelled me. These were conscientious scholars who devoted great effort to uncovering the nuances, complexities, and inter-connections of the societies that they studied. Yet they would casually characterize Western society in terms so simplistic that they would not be tolerated of an anthropologist speaking about a village society. (Carrier 1995b: vii–viii)

Carrier goes on to suggest that three trends are prevalent in anthropology today with regard to occidentalism: a tendency towards self-reflection, a growing interest in the 'invention of tradition', and an increasing concern with the ethnography of the West itself (1995b: viii–ix).

The relations between Occident and Orient, whether imagined or real, are now bound up with the process of globalization, also an increasing object of anthropological enquiry. In one of six volumes stemming from the 1993 Decennial Conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth, Norman Long (1996) speaks of 'globalization', 'localization', and even 're-localization'. Globalization involves

processes of movement in population (e.g., migrant labour), skills, capital, technology and technical knowledge, and also symbolic representations (e.g., notions of 'modernization' and 'globalization' itself, and new concepts of 'citizenship' such as that of the European Union). Localization involves the interplay between local forms of knowledge and external pressures, while re-localization involves the assertion, rediscovery, or invention of locally based knowledge, especially knowledge which can be used in agrarian economic and social development. Long argues for actor-centred research on these issues.

In the same volume, Aihwa Ong (1996) hints at the fallacy in seeing all aspects of globalization, modernization, and industrialization as the same thing, and explicitly opposes the yet bigger fallacy of equating any of these simply with Western culture. Take modernization: China has been in the process of modernizing for a very long time; and the process of modernization and even industrialization in Japan began, not with Commodore Matthew Perry's visit in 1853 (as American school children are taught), but as an ultimate consequence of the expansion of trade from China throughout East and Southeast Asia over a long period.

The true 'postmodern condition', to my mind, is reflected in Marc Augé's (1995 [1992]) intriguing study of the globalized 'non-space' of refugee camps, international hotels, motorways, and airport lounges. As a theme promoted by both evolutionist and postmodernist anthropology as well as a topic visible to anthropologists whenever they do fieldwork or even attend conferences, globalization is a popular and timely concern. The irony is that in theoretical terms it might as easily be seen as most akin to the least trendy of all theoretical perspectives, diffusionism.

Postmodernism and postmodern anthropology

Postmodernism constitutes a critique of all 'modern' understandings. Postmodernists define what is 'modernist' as what is all-encompassing; they reject both grand theory in anthropology and the notion of completeness in ethnographic description. On the latter score, they oppose the presumption of ethnological authority on the part of the anthropologist. Thus reflexivity, and ultimately embodiment, came to the fore. In a wider sense, postmodernist anthropology takes its cue from critical studies of 'orientalist' writing and levels its critique at the creation of the 'other' (and consequent definition of the 'self') as the driving force of all previous positions in the discipline. Postmodernism is also a logical development of both relativism and interpretivism, so much so that it is difficult to isolate these perspectives except superficially – by chronology, vocabulary, or style of writing.

The return to relativism

In a provocative article, Sjaak van der Geest (1990) has suggested that relativism itself is a dogma, not the absence of one. Anthropologists propagate relativism against the cognitive certainties both of those from alien cultures which they study and of non-anthropologists from their own cultures. Yet anthropology has, within the last decade, returned from mildly relativistic notions that each culture has its own value system or semantic structure to stronger views reminiscent of those of Benedict and Whorf. Only now these are couched in the jargon of postmodernism and devoid of any theory of culture as a whole. All this highlights the fact that 'relativism' is not really a monolithic concept (see also chapter 7). The term designates a myriad of theoretical fragments carved from the rock of Boasian anthropology. Yet Boasianism, in one form or another, remains a touchstone to many in American anthropology, both those who oppose relativist dogma and those who espouse insights brought more recently from newer trends in thinking about the relation between anthropology and its objects of study.

Postmodernism came into anthropology long after its early use in studies of art and the practice of architecture. In those fields, from the late 1950s, the term characterized a rejection of formal principles of style and the admission of unlikely blends and especially of local variation. In the social sciences, including anthropology, the term recalls the definition put forward by Jean-François Lyotard, Professor of Philosophy at the Université de Paris VIII (Vincennes), in his report to the government of Quebec on the 'postmodern condition': 'Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard 1984 [1979]: xxiv).

In anthropology, following from this, postmodernism involves a rejection both of grand theoretical truth and of the wholeness of ethnographic reality. In other words, to a postmodern anthropologist there is no true, complete statement that can be made about a culture. Nor, for many, can we even come up with an approximation. Therefore, grand theory (what Lyotard calls 'metanarrative') is doomed – except, it seems, the metanarrative of postmodernism itself!

'Writing culture'

Anthropology's premier postmodernist text is *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), based on a conference on 'The Making of Ethnographic Texts', held in Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1984 (see also Marcus and Clifford 1985). Eight practising anthropologists, a historian of anthropology (James Clifford), and a literary critic (Mary Louise Pratt)

presented papers there, and all but one of these appears in the celebrated volume (the missing paper was by Robert Thornton). The unifying theme of *Writing Culture* is a consideration of literary methods within anthropological discourse, though the authors hold a range of views from moderate to radical on the subject. A number of contributors also examine the intrusion of power relations in the ethnographic process. It is worth touching very briefly on each.

James Clifford, in his introduction, attacks the idea of ethnography as a representation of the wholeness of culture and stresses the incompleteness of ethnographic expression, even in the hands of indigenous scholars. He argues for an appreciation of ethnography as writing, but rejects the extremist view that it is only writing or that the recognition of ethnography as a kind of 'poetry' precludes objectivity. His substantive contribution, on 'ethnographic allegory', is decidedly literary in character, and focuses on 'the *narrative* character of cultural representations' (Clifford 1986: 100). George Marcus also offers a literary analysis, but in his case invoking world-systems theory to unmask the 'authority' of the author; and in his afterword he comments briefly on the challenge he believes the Santa Fe conference has given the discipline.

Mary Louise Pratt discusses some diverse ethnographies; she advocates the 'fusion' of object and subjective understandings and the re-examination, on the part of ethnographers, of their enterprise in light of historical precedent and literary genre. Vincent Crapanzano looks at the problems of translation in three quite different texts, including an eighteenth-century one, a nineteenth-century one, and one by Geertz (on the Balinese cockfight). Renato Rosaldo looks at modes of authority in two texts, including Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer*; and Talal Asad takes as his object of 'translation' an essay by Ernest Gellner on 'translation' in the British anthropological tradition, notably in *Nuer Religion*.

Michael Fischer looks at the dynamism of ethnicity, which, he says, must be re-invented in each generation. Paul Rabinow takes on textual construction in Geertz's interpretivism and Clifford's 'textual meta-anthropology', along with other examples, to illustrate that representations are social facts. Stephen Tyler, a convert from cognitive anthropology, here speaks with the strongest postmodern voice. He comments on the death of scientific thought and celebrates the fragmentary nature of a would-be postmodern ethnography. The latter, he says, aims at a 'discourse', that is, a dialogue, as opposed to the former monologue of the ethnographic 'text'. However, he laments that no postmodern ethnography exists, while asserting at the same time that 'all ethnography is post-modern in effect' (Tyler 1986: 136).

Since *Writing Culture*, a number of anthropologists, both those involved

in that project and others, have continued the discourse. Notable examples are Marcus and Fischer's (1986) attempt to justify the experimental and critical nature of recent anthropological writing; Clifford's (1988) treatise on twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art; Michael Taussig's (1993) highly original study of imitation and the construction of alterity in the self/other opposition; and some of Rabinow's (1997) collected essays. The tempered search for connections figures prominently in the work of Marilyn Strathern (e.g., 1991; 1992), one of the leading anthropologists in Britain today. She argues, among other things, that partial connections are necessary because the amount of data anthropologists have to hand is too great to treat in any other way. American sociologist Norman Denzin (1997) sums up postmodern ethnography as a 'moral discourse'. He says that ethnographers should move beyond the traditional, objective forms of writing about peoples to more experimental and experiential texts, including autobiography and performance-based media; towards greater expression of emotion; to fictionalization, thereby expressing poetic and narrative truth, as opposed to scientific truth; and also towards lived experience, praxis, and multiple points of view.

Postmodernists often stress the arbitrary in culture, descriptions of culture, and theorizing about culture. When commenting on postmodernism itself, postmodernists tend to invoke reflexivity. As Crapanzano (1992: 88) puts it, 'Not only is the arbitrariness of the sign in any act of signification paradigmatically proclaimed but so is the arbitrariness of its syntagmatic, its syntactic, placement. ' In other words, whereas some poststructuralists (notably Bourdieu) oppose Saussurian distinctions altogether, here Crapanzano, a decided postmodernist, expands the Saussurian notion of arbitrariness to cover not only signs themselves, but even signs in relation to other signs. For postmodernists, one's vantage point is arbitrary. Therefore the distinction which Saussure, and virtually every linguist and anthropologist since have recognized, that between observer and observed, is called into question.

For reflexivists and other, less self-centred late interpretivists, the nomothetic and the ideographic (see Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 1) blend to form an unbounded mix. Ethnography and theory, and observer and observed (or collective self and collective other), become almost indistinguishable in the course of an anthropological text. It is perhaps no accident that the ethnography of Europeans by Europeans, or of Americans by Americans, form good examples of this genre. Michael Herzfeld (a Harvard-based Englishman who writes on Greeks) epitomizes the soft postmodern tradition in anthropology. His *Anthropology Through the Looking Glass* (Herzfeld 1987) ranges from critiques of more formal and

positivistic anthropological theory and exaltations of earlier wisdom, to discussions of contradictions within Greek culture and, more importantly, contradictions within the anthropological distinctions between self and other and observer and observed. It presents itself as a search for connections which override the contradictions. Herzfeld here draws heavily on the definitive third edition of the *New Science* of Gimbattista Vico (for an English translation, see Pompa 1982 [Vico 1744]: 159–267), an eighteenth-century Italian philosopher, little read in his time, who tried to understand the relations between entities such as history and social evolution, nationhood and religion.

Recent work on the theory of tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony is equally relevant to the postmodernist quest, and James Fernandez (e.g., 1986) of the University of Chicago is the leading proponent of this idea. I read his ethnography of the Fang of Gabon as a search for the deep emic, and therefore within the grand anthropological tradition which includes Malinowski and Boas (as well as Geertz). The spirit of David M. Schneider, great Chicago interpreter of the divergent symbolism of American and Yapese kinship, seems to be there too (see especially Schneider 1980 [1968]; 1984). Often borrowing new ideas from linguistics (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980), Fernandez and the contributors to his edited collection on tropes (Fernandez 1991) see culture as a constant and complex play of tropes. However, whereas George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argued that people map the unfamiliar onto the familiar to create new understanding, Naomi Quinn (1991), for example, argues essentially the reverse. Metaphors are based on culturally agreed understandings, and more often than not they add complexity rather than clarity. For her, as for generations of anthropologists before her, it is culture that is central.

Problems with postmodernism

In one of his many brilliant polemics, the late British philosopher-anthropologist, Ernest Gellner (1992: 22–79), attacked relativism and postmodernism as subjectivist and self-indulgent. Postmodernism is the most prevalent form of relativism today, and Gellner saw it as especially problematic in its misplaced attacks on, for example, the stated objectivism of European colonial ethnography. For postmodernists, ethnography in the colonial era represented a tool in the hands of oppressive colonial governments and multi-national corporations. For the anti-postmodernist, postmodernism's attempt to liberate anthropology is misguided, its attacks on earlier anthropological traditions misplaced, and its subjectivity downright nonsensical. The postmodernist, says Gellner, sees anthropology as

a movement from positivism (to postmodernists, a belief in objective facts) to hermeneutics (i.e., interpretation). Yet the postmodernist movement is really a replay of the romanticist one two centuries before, in their overthrow of the classical order of Enlightened Europe. Gellner goes on to attack the contributions to *Writing Culture* for their lack of precision. He concludes: 'In the end, the operational meaning of postmodernism in anthropology seems to be something like this: a refusal (in practice, rather selective) to countenance any objective facts, any independent social structures, and their replacement by a pursuit of meanings, both those of the objects of inquiry and of the inquirer' (1992: 29).

Rabinow and Clifford bear the brunt of Gellner's criticisms, but he blames Geertz for the origins of the obsession with hermeneutics and takes his philosopher's knife to Geertz's (1984) defence of relativism.

> Geertz has encouraged a whole generation of anthropologists to parade their real or invented inner qualms and paralysis, using the invocation of the epistemological doubt and cramp as a justification of utmost obscurity and subjectivism (the main stylistic marks of 'postmodernism'). They agonize so much about their inability to know themselves and the Other, at any level of regress, that they no longer need to trouble too much about the Other. If everything in the world is fragmented and multiform, nothing really resembles anything else, and no one can know another (or himself), and no one can communicate, what is there to do other than express the anguish engendered by this situation in impenetrable prose? (Gellner 1992: 45)

Let me sum up the interpretivist and postmodernist enterprises. To soft postmodernists (including Geertzian interpretivists), society is like a text, to be 'read' by the ethnographer as surely as his own text will be read by his readers. Other postmodernists seem to see culture as 'shreds and patches' (to borrow Lowie's phrase) – each shred and each patch, a play on another one. To some, culture is a series of word plays or 'tropes'. Ethnography is much the same thing, and anthropological theory is little more. According to most adherents of these schools, there should be no grand theory and no grand analogy – except that culture is in some unspecified way 'like a text'. The question I would raise about all interpretivist approaches, to a greater or lesser degree, is what they think anthropology would be like if *their* metanarrative were true? Everything is relative; there is no truth in ethnography. Anthropology should dissolve into literary criticism, or at best into that brand of literary criticism that has taken over a big piece of anthropology's subject matter – cultural studies (see, e.g., Bratlinger 1990).

Yet there seems to be a subtle battle among interpretivists and postmodernists generally. One side sees ethnography as an end in itself, or rather an attempt to understand, but one which never quite reaches the

level of understanding previously claimed for it. These anthropologists try to understand the human condition through detail, even the detail of ethnographic activity. Radical reflexivists are happy to write more about themselves doing ethnography than about the ethnographees, their subjects. This is the most extreme of all ideographic approaches: ethnography (writing about people) and ethnographic method (doing fieldwork) merge into one. While anthropology as a whole has taken on board and greatly benefited from recent discussions of reflexivity, it is nevertheless important to distinguish this strong version of the phenomenon from the simple awareness of the role of the ethnographer as a social actor as well as a gatherer of data.

The other side sees ethnography as a means to an end, a means to build a wider understanding of human nature. For these anthropologists, interpretivist in temperament and influenced by the more positive aspects of the postmodern critique, there is hope. They may borrow freely from evolutionism and functionalism, from structural Marxism or from biological anthropology. Theirs is a discipline of nomothetic inquiry. In the last section here, I will examine the possibilities for an anthropology in the latter image.

Mixed approaches: towards a compromise?

Robert Layton (1997: 157–215) characterizes present-day anthropology as polarized between socio-ecology and postmodernism. I believe that this characterization, while it has much truth, is too extreme. More and more, anthropologists are showing that they are happy to mix approaches and take from different theoretical traditions. This has been going on at least since the 1950s.

My preference is to look at new developments since the 1950s in terms of three strands of thinking: structural, interactive, and interpretive. These strands are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, in the hands of diverse theorists and ethnographers, they are intertwined, overlapping, intersecting. While Lévi-Straussian structuralism is concerned unambiguously with structure, transactionalism overwhelmingly with interaction, and Geertzian interpretivism at least primarily with interpretation, there is nevertheless great potential to aim for an understanding which draws on two or even three. Some recent writers, such as Anthony Cohen (e.g., 1985; 1994), have blended interpretive and interactive interests. Edmund Leach (1954), Victor Turner (1957), and Pierre Bourdieu (1977 [1972]) have emphasized both structure and action in their analyses of social process. Roy Willis (1974), Rodney Needham (1979), and a number of others, have mixed structure and interpretation. Some of Ladislav

Holy and Milan Stuchlik's work makes good use of all three within a single paradigm (e.g., Holy and Stuchlik 1983). The simple answer, then, is that the future of anthropology may lie in the blending of approaches. Sociologists, and some anthropologists, like to think in terms of the three great social theorists – Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. They are like primary colours. You can mix them, or rather mix different strands of their thinking, to come up with almost any theoretical position.

Of course, things may not be quite as simple as this. Italian anthropologist Carla Pasquinelli (1996) has suggested a different interpretation, specifically on the concept of 'culture'. She points out that this concept is quintessentially 'modern' in that it is what modernists employ to define the pre-modern 'other'. It arose within evolutionist theory and remained powerful right through what she sees as the three phases of anthropological thinking: the material phase (concerned with customs and traceable from Tylor to Boas), the abstract phase (concerned with patterns, e.g., Kroeber and Kluckhohn), and the symbolic phase (concerned with meaning and typified by Geertz). However, she argues, Geertz's position is liminal, as he sees culture as 'local knowledge', dispersed and fragmentary (i.e., postmodern), while nevertheless seeking, through 'thick description', the totality of culture which Tylor championed (i.e., modern). The break comes with James Clifford (e.g., 1988), who overthrows the object (culture) in favour of the subjectivity of narrative (i.e., of the ethnographer).

But can there be anthropology without an object? If we are not studying culture or society, what then is cultural or social anthropology? This, in my view, is the dilemma postmodernism has left for the present generation (cf. Strathern 1987b; Fox 1991). At the risk of stating the obvious, throughout this book I hope I have shown that cultural anthropology remains a field of diverse viewpoints. The present generation can take its pick between innovative work within the evolutionist school, it can still lift ideas from structuralist or processualist theories to suit new purposes, or it can accept wholeheartedly the postmodern condition if it is prepared for the consequences. The blending of old ideas, of all sorts, seems the safest bet.

Concluding summary

Interpretivism and postmodernism fit into anthropology in a very straightforward way, as aspects of a time-honoured set of analogies between language and culture. An understanding of that relationship, and its historical transformation, lies at the root of new developments in anthropology and in other social sciences.

Anthropological theory has paralleled linguistic theory in uncanny ways through its history. This is not simply fortuitous. Rather it has been recognized and utilized by generations of anthropologists through linguistic and related analogies. Analogy expresses form, but anthropology also shares some content with linguistics, both in that language is an aspect of culture and in that debates on language and writing have become prominent in anthropology itself. It is commonplace to talk of the 'linguistic analogy', though it might be more accurate to think of a set of linguistic analogies which have competed both against each other and against other analogies (the biological analogy, for example) through much of the history of anthropology.

Lévi-Strauss (1963 [1952]: 67–8) once drew attention to three levels of relations between linguistics and cultural anthropology: the relation between a language and a culture, that between language and culture in the abstract, and that between the two disciplines. I would choose a different set of relations to cover the whole realm of linguistic ideas within cultural anthropology: society or culture as grammar, ethnography as translation, and society and ethnography as 'discourse'.

The analogy of grammar was implicit in the work of Radcliffe-Brown and his followers, though they tended to speak more of anthropology as like biology and societies as 'organisms' than of anthropology as like linguistics and culture as 'language'. Later it was made explicit by Lévi-Strauss and structuralist anthropologists generally. For them culture and society have at their root a form which is analogous to the grammar of language. This may be a specific cultural grammar, or (in much of Lévi-Strauss' work), it may be a universal grammar held in common between all cultures.

The analogy of translation was implicit, and occasionally explicit, in the work of Evans-Pritchard. It is still more explicit in the work of Geertz with his notion of religion as a cultural system (Geertz 1966) and in his collections on 'interpretive anthropology' (1973; 1983). For Evans-Pritchard alien cultures are like foreign languages, to be 'translated' into terms familiar in the 'language' of one's own culture. For Geertz, culture is embodied in the symbols through which people communicate. Geertz has moved away from cognitive anthropology and its concerns with thought in the abstract, towards an understanding of action from the actor's point of view. In this he shares much with his early mentor, sociologist Talcott Parsons (e.g., 1949 [1937]), also with processual and action-oriented anthropologists, notably Victor Turner (e.g., 1967), and to some extent with the proponents of the 'embodiment' perspective to the study of ritual.

The discourse analogy, borrowed from Foucault (e.g., 1974 [1969]),

features prominently in social anthropology, especially but not exclusively in the work of those who see themselves as part of the postmodern project. Anthropology itself is a discourse. The older, modern anthropologies are discourses partly representing the interests of the segments of society from which they stem. Yet it would be too simplistic to define functionalism, for example, simply as a discourse produced by the British colonial enterprise (cf. Asad 1973). Rather, it is more meaningful to view anthropology throughout its history as a discourse on the human condition, played out in a dialogue between those under the scrutiny of anthropologists on the one hand, and the anthropologists themselves on the other. This view would unite postmodern and modern anthropology in a common enterprise – indeed one consistent with the definition of anthropology given in the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1771: I, 327): 'ANTHROPOLOGY, a discourse upon human nature'.

FURTHER READING

Douglas' *Evans-Pritchard* (1980) is the best guide to the basics of that thinker's anthropology. See also Pals' *Seven Theories of Religion* (1996), which contains interesting essays on both Evans-Pritchard and Geertz. Geertz's own *Works and Lives* (1988) makes stimulating reading on the ideas of a number of the other major anthropologists. The most important of Geertz's works though are his two collections of essays (1973; 1983). See also Shankman's essay 'The thick and the thin' (1984).

Knauft's excellent *Genealogies for the Present* (1996) reviews the debates in postmodernist anthropology and other recent trends. Lechte's *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers* (1994) is a useful guide to the ideas of structuralist, poststructuralist, and postmodernist thinkers, mainly outside anthropology but who have influenced our discipline. There are many guides to postmodernism in general, among the most interesting is Smart's *Postmodernism* (1993). On cultural studies and theoretical ideas within related fields, see Milner's *Contemporary Cultural Theory* (1994).

H. L. Moore's essay 'Master narratives: anthropology and writing' (1994 [1993]: 107–28) offers a stimulating and highly readable review of the problem of writing. See also James, Hockey, and Dawson's edited volume *After Writing Culture* (1997) for further British approaches to the problems highlighted in *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). A similar edited collection touching on reflexivity is Okely and Callaway's *Anthropology and Autobiography* (1992).