Paideuma 56:205–220 (2010)

IN TODAY'S WORLD, ANTHROPOLOGY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER*

Maurice Godelier

"The end of anthropology?" – This theme inspires a certain fear for some of our colleagues, for others, on the contrary, it expresses a hope. For me – and I am not alone – the problem is already behind us.

But whatever our reaction, the question itself grew out of the fact that, for a number of years, beginning somewhere in the 1980s in anthropology and slightly earlier in the literary disciplines, the social sciences and the humanities entered a period of crisis which called into question their concepts, methods and, more fundamentally, their legitimacy. Some of our colleagues denied that the work of the anthropologists who had gone before lacked any scientific authority, as did their own work before they became aware of the fictitious and ideological character of the 'narrations' constructed by Western anthropologists to disseminate what they claimed to have understood about other forms of culture and society.[1]

For the crucial question that anthropology, history, archaeology and other social sciences have struggled to answer since the beginning is: How can we come to understand and explain the existence of facts, attitudes and representations that have never been part of our own ways of living and thinking?

Obviously this question is not restricted to scientific knowledge alone: it arises every time that, for various reasons, human individuals or groups are brought to interact with other individuals or groups from different social classes within their own society or from societies that are profoundly different from their own.[2] Understanding the otherness of others means discovering the meanings and the reasons behind the forms of thought and lifestyles of those who are different from you. It means discovering what relations these others have among themselves, what positions they occupy in them and how they represent them. But understanding is not explaining. To explain means seeking to discover how the different social ways of existing we have managed to understand appeared here and there over time and were reproduced – sometimes over several centuries, and sometimes over several millennia – even as they changed, sometimes profoundly, for example, the world's great religions, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam.

---

* Translated from the French by Nora Scott

1 The so-called 'writing culture debate' is also referred to by Crapanzano, Kohl, Jebens and Münzel in the present collection.

2 On cultural difference and critique, see also the contributions by Crapanzano, Kohl, and Jebens in the present collection.

From Lewis Henry Morgan to Claude Lévi-Strauss, from Bronislaw Malinowski to Marshall Sahlins, anthropologists believed that, with the help of their concepts and methods, it was possible to gain knowledge of the social and cultural otherness of others at a distance, which would therefore be relatively objective. And each believed he was contributing to this in his own way. But it was precisely this claim to knowledge and this faith in the methods, concepts and theories that were developed to achieve it that some of us began to contest in the 1980s, thus setting off a crisis that was far from being wholly negative, as we shall see. Why this challenge and the resulting crisis? A look at the context of the 1980s may help us answer this question.

In 1945, Europe emerged victorious from a war with Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and imperialist Japan that had bled it white and made the United States the first world power, ahead of Soviet Russia. It was in this new balance of power that, between 1955 and 1970, the last European colonial empires disappeared one by one, either in the wake of bloody wars of liberation or more peacefully. From then on it was no longer possible to say that colonising meant civilising and that civilising meant helping other people advance more quickly on the path towards the progress already achieved by the West. Liberated from direct domination by the European powers, the former colonies, now independent nations, took a different path to development. Between 1980 and 1990 another global upheaval occurred in the form of the accelerated disintegration and then long-awaited collapse of the communist regimes that had been set up after World War II in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in Asia, the Far East, Africa and Cuba. Today, only a few shreds of that experience remain. These two upheavals profoundly modified the West's relations with the rest of the world, but also with itself, and they would go on to shake the intellectual world that grew up in Europe and the United States after the Second World War.

In effect, after the First World War, the Russian Revolution represented to many intellectuals – and not only to intellectuals – the birth of a new world and a new kind of man, the next stage in the progress of humanity. This progress was to consist in doing away with the capitalist economic market, the exploitation of human labour and the wasting of the natural resources that underpinned this system. But it also meant replacing the so-called 'bourgeois' forms of democracy serving the propertied classes with a higher form of democracy that would serve the people. In short, once again the West – but another West – held itself up as the measure and mirror of human progress.

It must be recalled here that the West is not singular, but plural, and that it was the West itself that spawned the critique of the economic and political systems that gave it its strength. It is therefore understandable that, at the end of the Second World War – in which Stalin's Russia fought on the side of the Allies and greatly contributed to their victory, before the socialist regimes showed themselves for what they were, dictatorships that exploited the masses – the dominant intellectual trends in the social sciences and philosophy, at least in France, were Marxism (as in the work of Althusser), structuralism (as in the work of Lévi-Strauss) and existentialism (as in the work of Sartre). Sartre's

position on the inalienable liberty of the individual opposed him to the Marxists and to Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, which argued for the existence of impersonal structures – whether conscious or unconscious – and their structural consequences. In the political arena, however, Sartre rapidly rallied to the partisans of revolution to bring down the bourgeois order.

The successive disappearance of the colonial empires and the socialist regimes shook the European intelligentsia and sparked a crisis that brought us into – to use the term coined by Jean-François Lyotard (1979) – the 'post-modern condition'. For Lyotard, this new condition meant two things for thinkers. First it meant the death of all 'meta-narratives', in other words, of explanations of history and of the complex diversity of societies in terms of a first cause that was effective in the last analysis, such as the Marxist notion of 'modes of production' or the Lévi-Straussian 'unconscious structures of the mind'. And second, the post-modern condition necessarily meant a return to the subject as an agent of history. This was illustrated in France by the second part of Michel Foucault's work, which, having joined Althusser and Lévi-Strauss in proclaiming the 'death of the subject', he devoted to analyzing the subjectification of individuals in various institutions structured by relations of power (Foucault 2001, 2008, 2009). Having come this far, it seemed clear that the next urgent task of theory was to 'deconstruct' – to quote Jacques Derrida (1991) – all of the former discourses found in philosophy and the social and human sciences.

There is in itself nothing surprising about deconstructing a discipline. It is a necessary and normal moment in the development of all sciences, natural as well as social. It is something that has to be done following the appearance of new ways of interpreting well-known facts, or in the face of new facts. But there are two ways to deconstruct a discipline. One leads to its dissolution and eventual disappearance; the other – based on the positive critiques produced during the deconstruction process – paves the way for the reconstruction of this same discipline on new foundations which are more rigorous, more critical and therefore analytically more effective than they were before.

It is therefore indispensable to point out a few of these positive criticisms of anthropology, since they already enable us to begin rebuilding. Furthermore, the very existence of these critiques shows that we must not confuse all of the publications and authors that fly the post-modernist flag. George Marcus is not Paul Rabinow, James Clifford is not Vincent Crapanzano, and Stephen Tyler is not Michael Fischer. And none of them were Clifford Geertz, who inspired them. Each is only himself. But before listing some of these results, I feel it is important to show that the theme of "The end of anthropology" itself falls into the first way of deconstructing a discipline, that which leads to its disappearance.

How, in effect, can a scientific discipline disappear? In two ways. A discipline can disappear because its very 'object' ceases to exist; or because, although its object still exists, the discipline that claimed to bring us to know it proved incapable of doing so. Let us consider the first possibility. Has the object of anthropology disappeared? The

Nuer, the Kachin, the Tikiopia and the Baruya have not disappeared. They exist. But their societies and their ways of living and thinking changed under colonial rule and are still changing. But does a science disappear merely because its objects evolve? If this were so, the discipline of history would have ceased to exist long ago, since all the past societies it studies have either disappeared or still exist but in completely different forms. Should anthropology disappear simply because, for instance, a large portion of Trobriand Islanders now live in New Zealand or in Los Angeles? This would implicitly presuppose that anthropology has no object other than so-called 'primitive', 'traditional', 'pre-industrial', 'non-urban' or 'non-Western' societies. In effect, this presupposition is an ideological a priori that anthropology was already forced to combat at the time of the publication of Lewis Henry Morgan's "Ancient society" (1985), in which the author divided all known societies into three stages located along a scale of human progress that went from 'savage' to 'barbaric' to 'civilised'. The latter, of course, was represented in Morgan's eyes by European and North American societies, at last liberated from the feudal regimes of the Middle Ages and borne up by the forces of modern market, industrial civilisation and democracy. The development of urban anthropology, gender studies and medical anthropology show that this is far from being the case.

Let us now look at the second reason that might cause the disappearance of our discipline. As I have already noted, the question asked by anthropology, history and other social sciences is the same: how can we come to understand and explain the existence of what has never been part of our own way of living and thinking? The argument no longer concerns the disappearance of the object of anthropology but the inability of anthropology to exist as a science. Proponents of this criticism argue that, since it came into being, anthropology has done nothing but produce ethnographic accounts that are no more than the projections of the ideologies of Western observers onto the societies they study. Two critical positions can be found in this line of thought. The first is that held by George Marcus, who nonetheless tendered the hope of a 'new ethnography';[3] the second is the radically critical position of Stephen Tyler (1986), who disputes that a new ethnography is even possible. For Marcus and Clifford, the ethnographies written by Malinowski, Edmund Leach, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard and the like were above all 'narrative fictions' (Clifford 1984) written with the complicity of the two parties engaged in getting to know another society – the ethnologist and his informant – and in producing 'fictions that each side accepts' (Marcus 1998:110). Marcus, however, believes that we can do otherwise and better. For Stephen Tyler, on the other hand, all ethnographic accounts are fated to be merely a 'reality fantasy of a fantasy reality' (1986:139). In his opinion, anthropology as a science was still-born, for any ethnographic account is 'neither an object to be represented nor the representation of an object [...] no object of any

[3] On 'multi-sited ethnography', see also the contributions by Crapanzano, Jebens and Kohl in the present collection.

kind precedes and constrains ethnography. Ethnography creates its own objects in its unfolding and the reader supplies the rest' (Tyler 1986:131). Here we recognise the theoretical position of Derrida and Paul de Man, for whom it was mandatory to 'deconstruct the illusion of reference, the possibility that a text could refer to a non-textual reality' (de Man 1986:19–20). Yet it is difficult to believe that the events and practices of other societies reported by anthropologists were all hallucinations (a fantasy reality) and that, for example, the attacks of 11 September 2001, claimed by Bin Laden and al-Qa'ida, were no more than a TV show (a reality fantasy).

I suggest that most of these criticisms bear on a single aspect of the anthropologist's trade, on the moment the anthropologist attempts to give a written account of his fieldwork and subsequent analyses. Clifford's criticism of ethnological monographs is at odds with reality. Indeed, an ethnographic monograph is not a literary work (though it may have literary qualities), and there are two reasons for this. Unlike Macbeth, a character sprung from the mind of Shakespeare, the *kula* existed before Malinowski landed in Kiriwina and continued to exist after he left. The second reason is that no one can complete or refute Shakespeare's work, whereas the studies carried out by Fred Damon, Nancy Munn, Annette Weiner and others, fifty years after Malinowski, completed, enriched and corrected his analysis of the *kula*. By contrast, curiously enough, there are two essential moments in the anthropologist's trade that have not been the object of fundamental criticism: the period in the field known as 'participant observation', and the moment when the anthropologist sits down to work out the interpretation of his or her field-notes, a time that begins in the field but continues beyond it. Perhaps these omissions can be attributed to the fact that Clifford, who was so critical of the ways others had of 'writing culture', never conducted fieldwork himself. But let us leave Tyler's provocations and Marcus's exaggerations to consider a few positive consequences yielded by the critiques of our 'post-modern' colleagues.

One very important result is to have pointed out the absence – or near absence – in the publications of numerous anthropologists of any analysis of the colonial relations being inflicted on indigenous populations even as they were carrying out their fieldwork with them. Evans-Pritchard, for example, hardly alludes to the arrival of British troops to subdue the tribes near where he was working. That does not necessarily mean that Evans-Pritchard was an agent of colonialism, nor that what he wrote about Nuer kinship and the political structures was false. Nor have all anthropologists passed over the colonial context of their work in silence. Take, for example, Raymond Firth (1967), who is clear about what was happening in Tikopia, or Germaine Tillion (1957, 2007), who worked in Algeria at the height of the colonial war, which she criticised publicly in France. Anthropologists were also right to point to the presuppositions underlying the notions of 'progress' and 'civilisation', especially since the Western ideology of progress is not dead. This ideology has simply mutated into the ideology of human rights, which provides Westerners and their allies with new reasons to judge other societies and to interfere in their own way of life. On all these points, subaltern and post-colonial stud-

ies have picked up where the first critiques left off, and they have made considerable contributions.[4]

Another important point was the appeal launched by George Marcus and others that anthropological texts speak with a plurality of voices, not only that of the anthropologist. Of course there was a risk that all these voices would then claim to be equally valid and the anthropologist would have nothing specific to add that would give him any particular weight in this concert. Other critiques arose not from the changing balance of power and interests between the West and the Rest, but from the struggles occurring within Western countries themselves, which also contributed to showing the work of our forbears in another light. I am talking about the criticisms – which developed first in the United States and the other Anglo-Saxon countries – of all the forms of discrimination, segregation and exclusion found in our societies, and also in the rest of the world for reasons of sex, skin colour, religion, etc. These forms of discrimination are not necessarily perceived as such in other societies, as for example in Islamic societies, where the fact that women are subordinated to men is considered to be grounded in religious principles. In the West, such views are now criticised in the name of the equality of all human beings before the law. This idea was certainly not present at the beginning of social life in caste-based India, in the Islamic world or in Baruya society,[5] and it is still not accepted in many aspects of European social life. Clifford made a useful contribution on this point when he showed that, in the otherwise remarkable book by Godfrey Lienhardt, "Divinity and experience: the religion of the Dinka" (1961), women did not appear except for one occasion when a woman explained to the anthropologist what cattle meant to men. This is probably a case of *androcentrisme*, but it is also notoriously difficult in certain societies for a male anthropologist to enter into contact with women.

A final point in this retrospective of positive contributions made by post-modern criticism: post-modernists have strongly contributed to the rejection of any essentialist interpretation of the otherness of others. This is not a new criticism. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Franz Boas (1920) had already shown that Northwest American Indian societies were open to and borrowed from each other: they were by no means totalities closed in around their essence. This is not to say that there are not dominant aspects of culture and organisation in all societies that are borne by their members as chief components of their identity and experienced as such. And it is easily understood that these dominant aspects do not vanish in a day, since they are largely responsible for the very reproduction of these societies.

---

4 See Ludden (2001) and, for a critical overview, Pouchepadass (2004).

5 'Baruya' is the name of a tribe living in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. 'Discovered' in 1951 by James Sinclair, they were known as famous salt makers. The group was divided into 15 patrilineal clans, eight of them being descendents of Yoyué people, who took refuge among the Andje and lately conquered the territory of their hosts. The Baruya are known for their male initiation rituals. I have done fieldwork among them during seven years between 1967 and 1981 (cf. Godelier 1982).

In short, there is nothing in all of these criticisms to indicate that we are going through what Sahlins calls the 'the twilight of anthropology'.[6] The conclusion is clear: we must keep on deconstructing, but so as to reconstruct the discipline on foundations that are better equipped to meet the challenges of the globalised world in which we will live and work in the twenty-first century.

I would like finally to return to the question I raised at the outset – How can we come to understand the otherness of others? – and to show how and why I believe anthropology is now better able to provide an answer than it was in the past, but on certain conditions. First, the social and historical otherness of others must be relative and not absolute. Next, others must be capable of understanding what humans invented for the purpose of interpreting the world around them and themselves within this world, and therefore for the purpose of acting on the world as well as on themselves – whether this cultural invention be the Aboriginal 'Dreamtime', Mahayana Buddhism or Marxism. It is also essential to stress that, while humans can understand the social otherness of other humans, they are not obliged to espouse the principles and values that produced this otherness, nor are they obliged to practice them themselves. Anyone can verify in his own experience of others that these two conditions exist in a very real way and that they invalidate the theses of those who argue for a fundamental incommunicability between cultures. To be an anthropologist is to exercise a profession that entails the production of verifiable and therefore refutable knowledge; the anthropologist's aim and methods are not those of the missionary, the soldier or the merchant, who intervene in societies that are not theirs. And to exercise his profession, it is not enough that the otherness of others be knowable – the anthropologist has to acquire the means to learn about this otherness. To do so, he must begin by constructing his own cognitive ego, which is different from his social ego and his intimate ego. The social ego can be inherited from birth – one is the son or daughter of a Brahmin, for example – or constructed over the course of a lifetime. The intimate ego is fashioned from birth by pleasant or painful encounters with others. This is the ego of desires, pleasures and sufferings, the ego that fashions a sensibility; it is also a way of being with others. Of course the social ego and the intimate ego are inextricably intertwined, and in this the anthropologist is no different from other people. What distinguishes the anthropologist is the fact that he must construct yet another ego, the cognitive ego just mentioned.

The cognitive ego is first of all an intellectual ego that is put together before leaving for the field from mental components – concepts, theories, discussions, controversies – acquired at the university or elsewhere and bearing the mark of their time. At one time one is readily a structuralist, at another a post-structuralist. But whatever the epoch, the cognitive ego is an ego which must learn to decentre itself with respect to

---

6 Anthropologists' ideas about the imminent decline of their discipline are also referred to by Crapanzano, Jebens, Kohl and Münzel in the present collection.

the other egos. Yet at the same time the cognitive ego is also an ethical and political ego that must maintain a state of critical vigilance against the ever-possible intrusion of the judgments that the anthropologist's own society has already formulated about other societies. To decentre oneself is also to suspend one's own judgment, to push back to the very horizon of consciousness the presuppositions of one's own culture and society, including those of one's own life story.

But the cognitive ego is not made up of ideas alone. The anthropologist must engage in a practice called participant observation, in the course of which he immerses himself in another society or another social milieu so as to study and understand them. But this raises a formidable problem that has remained unspoken in the criticisms addressed to anthropology: what does it mean to 'observe' and to observe while 'participating', and what is one supposed to participate in and to what extent? Participating in the life of others is not at all the same thing as going hunting a few times with a group of Inuit and helping to feed oneself and others on those days. To claim to be really 'participating' in the life of others, the anthropologist would have to 'behave like the others', to marry into the society, to have children and raise them, to take part in their rites. The great majority of anthropologists do not do these things, and it is not necessary for them to do so in order to understand the ways those with whom they live think and act. There is a fundamental difference between the anthropologist and those with whom he lives when it comes to how he uses what he gradually learns about the principles guiding their thinking and acting. For the members of the surrounding society, the knowledge they have of their myths, their rites, their kinship rules, the habits of the game they hunt, etc. serves to produce their concrete conditions of existence and thereby to reproduce – up to a certain point – their society. This goes on day in and day out. For the anthropologist conversely, the knowledge he has worked so hard to acquire and which is never complete almost never serves to produce the concrete conditions of his own existence in the society in which he has immersed himself. To be sure it serves to understand others, but not to act and interact as they do on all occasions. For as he accumulates this knowledge, at the same time the anthropologist produces himself as an anthropologist, a status that endows him with a position in his own society. This sheds some light on the nature of the place the anthropologist occupies when he is in the field. It is a place that he must construct, and this is difficult: it is a place that puts him at the same time outside and inside his own society, but also inside and at the same time outside the society in which he has chosen to live.[7] This place is thus at once concrete and abstract, which makes the presence and the work of the anthropologist an original experience of the relationship a man or a woman can have with others and with him- or herself.

Whatever the limits of his participation in the life of others may be, it is in this context that the anthropologist observes them. But just what does he observe? In princi-

7 On the 'in-betweenness' of the anthropologist, see also the contributions by Crapanzano, Kohl and Jebens in the present collection.

ple all of the interactions that go on around him, in the most diverse concrete situations, between the individuals and groups that make up the society in which he has chosen to live and work. To be sure, he does not observe the whole society, but his field of observation is structured by several kinds of events which are most enlightening. Certain recurring and predictable events are continually offered to his observing gaze: people get up, eat, go hunting or into the fields, come home, go to bed, and so on. Other events occur that are not repetitive, but which are up to a certain point predictable, such as a hunting accident or a murder and its aftermath. Last of all, there are cyclical events that come around again after several years and which concern all members of the society: the Baruya's male and female initiations, for instance. And yet, alongside these events – which in a sense are offered up for observation – the anthropologist also has to make use of observations that he has prompted by launching systematic large-scale studies and surveys, which can last for months and bear on different aspects of the social life of others, such as their agricultural practices, their initiation rites, forms of land-holding, land use and use of territory. When the field data are cross-checked, they produce results and discoveries that often surprise the anthropologist and contribute to giving him an even better understanding of the logic behind the ways the people around him think and act.

When these observations have been gathered – something that can take years – they must be interpreted and then disseminated. The anthropologist must then move on to other forms and levels of work. He must, for example, compare his data with those gathered by anthropologists in other societies. For instance, when I realised that the Baruya used an Iroquois-type kinship terminology – and since I knew that the same type of terminology in Iroquois society was associated with a matrilineal descent rule, whereas in Baruya society it is associated with a patrilineal descent rule – I was led to ask myself some theoretical questions concerning the conditions in which Iroquois-type kinship systems appeared and how they came to be distributed over several continents (Godelier 2004). These theoretical questions came to me, but they were of no interest to the Baruya. Of what practical use would it be to the Baruya to know that they have the same kinship terminology as certain Indians in North America? It might have interested some of the Baruya who had already been to university, or were interested in European or other societies. But aside from a very limited impact, this anthropological concern – entirely legitimate from the standpoint of the effort to learn about human modes of existence – does not mesh with any of the Baruya's existential problems.

This analysis of the difference between the knowledge shared by the actors themselves and that possessed by the anthropologist makes it clear that, for the actors, this concrete knowledge is an existential truth, whereas for the anthropologist it is abstract knowledge that will become the material he will use to try to construct some scientific truths. The discovery that the Baruya have a patrilineal kinship system which uses an Iroquois-type terminology allows us to understand how and why the notions of mother, father, sister, brother or cousin are different for them than for someone from the West.

In effect, if all of my father's brothers are also my fathers, and if all of my mother's sisters are my mothers, if all of their children are my brothers and sisters, then when my mother's husband dies I still have other fathers. And if I do not have a sister to give in exchange for a wife, I have the right and therefore the possibility to exchange my father's brothers' daughters, because they too are my sisters. Confronted with any number of problems, by the very nature of his kinship system a Baruya has at his disposal a network of solidarity and mutual assistance that we do not have. And that is something the anthropologist can observe and verify.

However much these essential truths may differ from one society to the next, they are nevertheless all attempts to answer existential questions, which, indeed, are present in all societies, although in specific forms. Humans, always and everywhere, have endeavoured to understand what it means to be born, to live and to die. Everywhere they have thought about the kinds of power they could legitimately wield over themselves or over others. Everywhere they have been concerned to define the relations humans are supposed to have with their ancestors, with nature spirits, with the gods or with God. Everywhere they have been concerned to give meaning to their environment: mountains, forest, sea, etc. And everywhere they have assigned a sense to the inequalities they have established between the sexes, between the castes, and so on, whether in order to legitimise them or to challenge them. In short, one of the objects of anthropology – and of history, too, in fact – is to compare these cultural and social answers and to explain, if possible, the conditions of their appearance and disappearance over space and time. These are levels of the theoretical work that go beyond the anthropologist's singular experience of a society in the field.

To conclude, I would like to use my personal experience to illustrate what I have learned from my efforts to deconstruct and reconstruct anthropology. When I undertook to deconstruct a few self-evident anthropological truths, I came to realise that some of these celebrated truths were now dead for me personally. I showed that nowhere are kinship relations, and even less the family, the basis of societies. This conclusion is valid for all societies, even those without classes or castes – which seemed to be proof to the contrary – and which the textbooks called 'kin-based societies'.

When I began researching kinship systems and their past or recent metamorphoses, I also looked at an aspect that is usually neglected: the way societies, in accordance with their kinship systems and their descent rules – unilineal, bilineal or undifferentiated – represent the way children are made, from the time of their conception. I therefore compared such representations from twenty-two societies in Oceania, Africa, Asia and North America as well as the European Christian view. To my great surprise, I found that all of these societies, despite their different kinship systems, had one point in common: all, in one form or another, maintained that sexual intercourse between a man and a woman was not enough to make a child. What they made with their semen (the Baruya) or with their menstrual blood (the Trobriand Islanders) was a foetus; but for this foetus to become a child, it always took the intervention of other invisible and more

powerful agents such as ancestors who were reincarnated in the child's body (Inuit, Trobriand Islanders) or the Christian God who at a time of his choosing introduces a soul into the child's body (Godelier 2004:301).

In other circumstances I was led to re-examine Marcel Mauss's famous analysis of the gift, revisited and criticised by Lévi-Strauss (Godelier 1996). In the process, I discovered that, alongside things one sells and gives, there are also things that Mauss and Lévi-Strauss neglected to analyse, namely things that must be neither sold nor given, but must be kept and passed on to later generations. This third category of 'things' always bears a major aspect of the identity of human groups. They belong to what we call the domain of the 'sacred', but we must be careful here: the sacred extends beyond the religious domain to include the political. In our democratic societies, the constitution, which sets down the rules that enable millions of people to live together, is an object that can be neither sold nor bought; the constitution itself is not a commodity. What can be bought, however, are electoral votes. The existence of this area of life which does not fall into the categories of either commercial exchanges or exchanges of gifts and counter-gifts – equivalent or not – shows the limits of Lévi-Strauss's (and others') claims that social life rests entirely on exchange: the exchange of women, of wealth and services, of signs and of meanings – in other words, kinship, economy and culture. In fact, they had simply forgotten that, in order for things to be exchanged and to circulate, there had to be other things that did not circulate and could not be exchanged.

These analyses then led me to raise two problems, which turned out to be connected. One was the presence and the role at the heart of all social relations of imaginary cores. An example from kinship: patrilineal societies claim that the man's semen makes the body of the foetus and that the woman is a mere vessel for this semen. Conversely, Trobriand Islanders maintain that the semen does not make the body of the foetus, which is the job of the mother's menstrual blood. The Baruya claim that it was the sun that gave the ancestor of the Kwarrandiar clan the *kwaimatnie*, the sacred objects and secret formulas that allow them to initiate their boys and turn them into warriors (Godelier 2004:255–269).

Of course, all these stories refer to facts that we regard as imaginary and that are enacted in the initiation rites that constitute symbolic practices which transmute imaginary facts into real social relations in which individuals occupy distinct but interconnected positions according to sex, age, or their capacity to become great warriors or shamans. Contrary to Lévi-Strauss, but in line with Geertz, what we are looking at here is not the primacy of the symbolic but the primacy of the imaginary by means of the symbolic.

The Baruya case raised another problem, but at the same time suggested an answer. According to Baruya tradition and my own calculations, their society appeared recently, somewhere around the eighteenth century. It originated with a group of men and women from several clans of one tribe, the Yoyué, who, fleeing a massacre, found refuge and succour with the Andjé, a tribe living a few days' walk away. Several genera-

tions later, the refugees' descendants massacred their hosts and took over part of their territory, where they built their own initiation house and initiated their own boys. In this case it is clear that it was neither the kinship relations nor the economic relations between individuals and groups that made them into a society. It was what we in the West would call political-religious relations: 'religious' because, in the course of the initiations, the gods and the ancestors work together with the initiation masters to initiate the boys; 'political' because the initiations are believed to cleanse the boys of what they have received from women and to prepare them to govern their society without them. In short, it is these political-religious relations that establish and legitimise the sovereignty the Baruya exercise over their territory, the boundaries of which are known if not recognised by the neighbouring tribes.

I shall pass over the example of Tikopia. According to the traditions reported by Firth, Tikopia was invaded by groups from other islands – Ontong Java, Pukapuka, Rotuma, Anuta, etc. – which engaged in constant battles until the clan ancestor of the Kafika instituted rites in which each group had its function and place and which made them into a society. The founding ancestor having been assassinated by a rival, the gods of Polynesia changed him into an *atua*, a god of the Island of Tikopia, and his direct descendants thus came to have first place in the rites because their bodies now possessed the *mana* of a god. In Tikopia too, then, it was political-religious relations that welded the various non-related human groups into a society (Firth 1967:15–30).

A last example will bring us up to the present century and to the globalised world in which we are now practising our trade. Saudi Arabia is a state that did not exist at the beginning of the eighteenth century. It arose between 1740 and 1742 from the joint ambitions of two men: Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad Ibn as-Sa'ud. The first was a religious reformer and member of a tribal confederation that had expelled him when he called for a *jihad* against what he considered to be the bad Muslims who populated the holy places of Islam, Mecca and Medina. In the same vein as Hanbalism, one of the four schools of law within Sunni Islam that emerged in the ninth century, Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab was opposed to all innovation, all personal interpretation of the Qur'an, and wanted to force all Muslims to return to the traditions of the early believers. The other figure in this story, Muhammad Ibn as-Sa'ud, an ambitious tribal chief and ruler of the small Nadj city of al-Dir'iya in central Arabia, aspired to bring all of the surrounding tribes under his rule. But in the Muslim world this also required religious legitimacy. This was provided by the preacher Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab and his call to *jihad*, for which he needed the support of a political and military power. The meeting between the two men resulted in the alliance of two types of social power – the religious and the political – and in the birth of the first Saudi state and the taking of Mecca and Medina in 1802–1804. Wahhabism became the state religion at that time (al-Rasheed 2002, Vassiliev 2002).

Now let us fast-forward a century and a half. In 1938 oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia, which found itself in possession of a quarter of the world's reserves. In 1945,

Franklin Roosevelt signed a treaty with the Saudi king in which the United States promised to defend the kingdom against neighbouring Iraq and Iran in exchange for its oil. In 1979, under Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran, with Shi'a Islam as its official religion, became the first Islamic republic, and the Russians invaded Afghanistan. Thousands of Muslim volunteers, among them Osama Bin Laden, armed by the Americans and funded by Saudi Arabia, spent a decade battling the Russian army, forcing them to withdraw from Afghanistan in 1989. After the Russian departure came the Taliban and al-Qa'ida ('the Base'), which was created to launch *jihad* no longer just against bad Muslims, as in the eighteenth century, but against Jews, Christians and the materialistic West in general that had been humiliating and exploiting Arabs and Muslims since the nineteenth century.

Once again, neither kinship relations nor economic relations explain the formation of this new society. The economy of the eighteenth-century central Arabian tribes did not in itself drive the formation of a state, no more than did the kinship relations found in the tribes or tribal confederations – although once the state began to take shape, marriages and alliances between the great 'houses' and tribes bolstered the power of the as-Sa'ud dynasty (Godelier 2007:221–248).

This is where we stand today. After 9/11, which once again upset the balance of power in the world, we saw the US fail in its intervention in Iraq and lose its global political hegemony. Other peoples and other nations – China, India, Russia – are now bringing their own influence to bear on relations between the West and the Rest, though this may not mean the death of capitalism, but rather a new opportunity for a multitude of local societies to re-affirm or re-invent their cultural and political identities. As economies find themselves ever more closely integrated into the capitalist market system, an opposite trend is prompting the segmentation of political regimes and resistance from local identities.

Nothing in this process seems to predict the approaching death of anthropology. On the contrary, anthropology – together with history – is one of the social science disciplines that is best able to help us understand the complexity of our now globalised world and the nature of the conflicts and the crisis we are experiencing. In such a world, it would be irresponsible and indecent for anthropologists to stop trying to understand others – and themselves at the same time – and making their results known. After all, that is our job.

References

AL-RASHEED, Madawi
2002 *A history of Saudi Arabia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

BOAS, Franz
1920 "The method of anthropology", *American Anthropologist* 22:311–321

CLIFFORD, James
1984 "De l'ethnographie comme fiction. Conrad et Malinowski", *Etudes rurales* 97/98
1986 "Partial truths", in: James Clifford, and George Marcus (eds.), *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*, 1–26. Berkeley: University of California Press

CLIFFORD, James, and George E. Marcus (eds.)
1986 *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography.* Berkeley: University of California Press

CUSSET, François
2003 *French theory.* Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux Etats-Unis. Paris: Editions La Découverte

DERRIDA, Jacques
1991 *Donner le temps.* Paris: Gallilée

FIRTH, Raymond
1967 *Tikopia ritual and belief.* Boston: Beacon Press

FOUCAULT, Michel
2001 *L'Herméneutique du sujet.* Paris: Gallimard
2008 *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres.* Volume 1. Paris: Gallimard
2009 *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres.* Volume 2: Le Courage de la vérité. Paris: Gallimard

GEERTZ, Clifford
1973 *The interpretation of cultures.* New York: Basic Books
1988 *Works and lives: the anthropologist as author.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

GODELIER, Maurice
1982 *La Production des Grands Hommes.* Pouvoir et domination masculine chez les Baruya de Nouvelle Guinée. Paris: Fayard
1996 *L'Enigme du Don.* Paris: Fayard
2004 *Métamorphoses de la Parenté.* Paris: Fayard
2007 *Au Fondement des Sociétés Humaines.* Ce que nous apprend l'anthropologie. Paris: Albin Michel
2009 *In and out of the West: reconstructing anthropology.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press

GODELIER, Maurice, and Marilyn STRATHERN
1991 *Big man and great man: personifications of power in Melanesia.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

LIENHARDT, Godfrey
1961 *Divinity and experience: the religion of the Dinka.* Oxford: Oxford University Press

LUDDEN, David (ed.)
2001 *Reading subaltern studies: critical history, contested meaning and the globalization of South Asia.* New Delhi: Permanent Black

LYOTARD, J.F.
1979 *La condition post-moderne.* Paris: Editions de Minuit

MALINOWSKI, Bronislaw
1927 *The father in primitive psychology.* New York: Norton

MAN, Paul de
1979 *Deconstruction and criticism.* New York: Seabury Press
1986 *The resistance to theory.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

MARCUS, George E.
1998 *Ethnography through thick and thin.* Princeton: Princeton University Press

MARCUS, George, and Michael FISCHER
1986 *Anthropology as cultural critique: an experimental moment in the human sciences.* Chicago. University of Chicago Press

MORGAN, Henry Lewis
1871 *Systems of consanguinity and affinity of the human family.* Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution (Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge 218.)
1985 *Ancient society, or researches in the lines of human progress from savagery through barbarism to civilization.* Reprint with a foreword by Elisabeth Tooker. University of Arizona Press, Tucson ([1]1877)

POUCHEPADASS, Jacques
2004 "Que reste-t-il des Subaltern Studies?", *Critique internationale* 24:67–79

SAHLINS, Marshall
1999a "Two or three things that I know about culture", *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3:399–421
1999b "What is anthropological enlightenment? Some lessons of the twentieth century", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28:i–xxiii

SALADIN D'ANGLURE, Bernard
1986 "Du phoetus au shamane, la construction d'un troisième sexe Inuit", *Etudes Inuit* 10(102):25–113

1980 "'Petit-ventre', l'enfant géant du cosmos Inuit", *L'Homme* 20(1):7–46

TILLION, Germaine
1957 *L'Algérie en 1957*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.
2007 *Combats de guerre et de paix*. Paris: Editions du Seuil

TYLER, Stephen
1986 "From document of the occult to occult document", in: James Clifford, and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*, 122–140. Berkeley: University of California Press

VASSILIEV, Alexei
2002 *The history of Saudi Arabia*. London: Saqi Books