ESSAY 5

THE NEMESIS OF METHOD

INTRODUCTION

One way of describing postmodernism is as a campaign to re-balance intellectualised privileging. That is, postmodernist interventions in any domain always question the privileging of one side of an intellectually specified dichotomy. Thus, we have attacks on the privileging of text over speech, writer over reader, reflection over action, theory over practice, reason over emotion, the objective over the subjective, and, of course, Philosophy over morality (or ethics or politics, depending on exactly who is undertaking the campaign).

In this essay, we take up one such attempted re-balancing, or rather *set* of re-balancings; between disinterested observation and engaged intervention, decontextualised and contextualised understanding, what once used to be called emic and etic descriptions, and perhaps most of all, between what nowadays are most often described as grounded and abstracted theory. The potential outcome of this re-balancing is, of course, to be a levelling of descriptions. None is prior or more fundamental than any other. In the domain within which this particular debate occurred, however, namely qualitative approaches in Anthropology and Sociology, it has had one further consequence. Because of those disciplines' proclivity for what Clifford Geertz (1988) once called "moral hypochondria", a new meta-research task has been ordained. This is the requirement to engage in methodological reflexivity. Such reflexivity is now (at least in some places and for some discourses) the hallmark of authentic social science.

Of course, postmodernism as a mode of thinking was not the prime mover here. A distaste for scientistic forms of cultural analysis had long been a strong theme in qualitative social science. This was married to a disenchantment with the proffered alternatives to surveys and statistical modelling. The collecting and classifying of objects, events, rituals, indeed all cultural forms, (alternative techniques appearing to have been derived from natural history rather than natural science) failed to provide insight into the subjective experience of members of different cultures. Programmatic summaries by senior figures such as Clifford Geertz set out the frameworks for a new departure centred on what was called "the interpretation of cultures" (Geertz 1993). Such interpretive stances explicitly and determinedly rooted themselves is the presumption that as social actors we are all "suspended in webs of meaning" (to quote Geertz yet again). The purpose of ethnography as the method for the interpretation of culture was, as far as practically possible, to capture and represent "the native's point of view".

REFLEXIVITY AS METHOD

It was into the junction of these points of view, those of the academic, disinterested researcher and the practical, engaged social actor, that postmodernism drove its wedge. This was first framed in terms of the impossibility of bridging, or otherwise overcoming, the social, political, economic, in short *cultural* gap between the researcher and the researched. Despite the researcher's best endeavours, without such bridging it was inevitable any rendering of the setting would be in terms which were alien to it. The researcher's point of view would be privileged over that of the researched. Furthermore, in as much as members of the researched society became engaged in the professional activity of social science, and therefore learned to see their culture in terms framed by that discipline, it would be alienating as well. What the first challenge seized upon, then, was what was interpretive social science's entanglement in the transition from colonial to post-colonial power structures.

However, a second challenge was also posed. This was regarding the consequences of introducing the metaphorical elision between interactional and textual understanding which interpretive social science was promoting. Interpreting the activities of a culture was said to be like deciphering a palimpsest or translating an ancient text. Reading culture was an exercise in hermeneutics. But, just as it had with literary criticism, postmodernism questioned the possibility of such readings. It questioned both whether the conception of pre-given text to be read did not privilege the writer over the reader and whether the notion of a ground truth to be captured and represented in any account was coherent. As Stephen Tyler put it:

> *A post modern ethnography is a co-operatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect. (Tylor 1986 p125)*

By extending it to the gap between the observer and the observed in locales which were far more familiar, the caesura between reader and writer to which Tylor points was turned back on itself. Postmodernist arguments in Queer Theory, Feminism and Sociology of Ethnicity, to name but a few, questioned the authenticity of accounts of forms of sexuality, gendered lives, and minority cultures in *our* culture where the biographical disjuncture of the researcher and the researched might not be so obvious.

Once the genie of biographical justificationism was out of the bottle, the scramble to assert personal grounds for authenticity got underway:

> *In my recent interview work with Black gay men living with HIV/AIDS .....I seek to help these men tell their stories; stories that traverse the boundaries between death and life, between loss and gain, between fear and a powerfully embraced self-determination; between acceptance and regret, and between regret and a righteous transcendence into self knowing ..... And once again, although I claim a particular membership as a Black gay man, but one NOT living with HIV/AIDS, I claim full membership in this community of men as a mourning subject—as a man who has lost a biological brother and a host of cultural brothers to AIDS. I seek to include voices of Black gay men living with HIV in the discussions of AIDS, discussions that are shrouded in secrecy in the Black community and racially erased from the public discourse of AIDS. And maybe this is not "real ethnography" per se, per se now as a noun that names the particularity of a thing. Though my intensions are not just to capture some aspect of their oral history—but to contextualize lived experience within a cultural community (gay life, the era of HIV/AIDS, and the politics of activism) that is*

> *both about the intersectionality of Blackness, gayness and the category of man that makes salient these characteristics, but also in a larger culture of discussion and silence around the particularity of their predicament. (Alexander 2011 p99)*

As Alexander goes on to set out, the mode of research reporting that is now required is one which begins and ends in the particulars of the researcher's biography.

> *So I do not do "traditional ethnography" per se. Per se in this sense as an adjective signifying the oxymoronic relationship of not really, but really—for I am engaged in a radical revisioning of relationships and spaces of possibility in human social engagement—in the classroom, in the Black community, in academia, in the embodied presence of being a Black gay man, and other locations that I find actual and mythic representations of my body circulating and preceding my arrival in time and space—feeling and resisting the reflective appraisals of others. So I unapologetically locate myself in my fields of study. (Alexander Op. Cit. p100)*

This "location" results in a new, hybrid method which Alexander calls "auto/ethnography".

> *My own approach to reflexivity in ethnography allows a space of opening, a space of reconciliation between objective facts and emotional response to critically reflected upon experience, on what we know and how we came to know it. And this same reflexive component in auto/ethnography, both written and performed, helps to provide a template on which the auditors of these texts might follow suit; applying the method (or approach) to significant aspects of their own cultural experiences and ways of making sense of experience. (Alexander Op. Cit. p 101)*

For many in the discipline, reflexive auto/ethnography induces vertigo. Finding a secure place from which to say anything definitive about the domain under study becomes almost all consuming. Here is a not untypical rendering.

> *It is the task of each researcher, based on their research aims, values and the logic of the methodology involved, to decide how best to exploit the reflexive potential of their research. Each researcher will choose their path – a perilous path, one which will inevitably involve navigating both pleasures and hazards of the marshy swamp. For all the difficulties inherent in the task, to avoid reflexive analysis altogether is likely to compromise the research. The swamp beast still needs to be confronted as MacMillan's ..... reflexive poem captures so eloquently:*
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> *Reflexivity, like hypnotherapy, has various levels.*
> *Some dabble near the surface, dipping into reflexive moments, flirting with the images evoked in the reflection, before returning to the safety of the mundane.*
> *Others attempt to confront the fear of the monster lurking in the abyss by descending into the deeper realms of reflexivity. It is those who confront the beast who will truly know what is there, in the dark beyond . . .(Finlay 2002 (b) p 227)*

In a related piece, the same author describes the attraction of the method by using a term which is redolent of the dynamic which this line of thinking was serving.

> *"Coming out" through reflexive analysis is ultimately a political act. Done well, it has the potential to enliven, teach, and spur readers toward a more radical consciousness. Voicing the unspoken can empower both researcher and participant. As more researchers grasp the nettle, the research in the future can move in new, creative directions. Are we ready to embrace the challenge? (Finlay 2002 (a), 543-4)*

The mandarin detachment of Malinowski and Evans Pritchard has morphed into political activism. Answering Howard Becker's rhetorical question 'Whose Side Are We On?' (Becker 1970) is now the first task in formulating a research programme.

Stepping Back

What seems to be happening here is the substitution of one form of legitimation or grounding of social science description by another. The levelling of the metaphysical antinomy of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' has not led to tolerance for both but rather the privileging of subjectivity instead. Since there can be no externalist 'view from nowhere', all views from somewhere are subjective, partial and political. Without countervailing acknowledgement and acceptance of such bias, the accounts given by researchers cannot be other than exploitative and oppressive; providing accounts of *their* views of the world in terms of *our* views of the world. The task of postmodern interpretive social science, therefore, is to challenge that exploitation and oppression and to reveal them for what they are.

This is worth teasing apart a little, if only because, as we will see in our discussion of Cultural Sociology[31], this line of reasoning is very attractive to students and tends to engender a fair degree of intellectual giddiness among the unwary.

Perspectivism rests on an argument with four distinct parts, none of which is, *ab initio,* implausible.

1. A succession of scholars, most notably Thomas Kuhn and those working in the Sociology of Science, have demonstrated that the institutionalised ideology of scientific objectivity and progress is not an accurate representation of the way science is carried on. It follows that attempts to base social science method and approach on that ideology are at best misguided.
2. Interpretive social science deliberately eschews attempts to copy the physical and natural sciences both in its definition of its topic (subjective meaning and experience) and its definition of its method (qualitative analysis).
3. Analysis of meaning in Linguistics, Philosophy and Hermeneutics stresses that meaning (of words, sentences, assertions, propositions, and texts) is reflexive on the context of interpretation. Meaning is as much found as left.
4. To access the meaning of cultural forms, researchers have to immerse themselves in and, at least in significant part, come to share the culture they study. This cultural sharing resolves the reflexivity of meaning.

As we say these are not unreasonable positions to adopt. But then we get a major *non sequitur.*

5. Because the researcher does not actually share the culture (does not go completely native, so to speak), in the end, no full, authentic, fully reflexive understanding is possible. The outsider view will always predominate and this will be a partial, distorting and biased rendering of the insider perspective.

[31] See Essay 6

However, this last assertion does not follow from propositions 1-4 above. Or rather, it only appears to follow if we privilege as the basis for social scientific description what we will call 'the native's point of view' over the researcher's. This reverse privileging rests upon two further mistakes.

First, underpinning the inference is the assumption that there is a single, definitive, universal fact of the matter description which is 'the native's point of view'. This is no more than the reintroduction of the positivist Holy Grail, albeit in a new form. What we end up with is not 'scientistic positivism' but a 'subjectivist' one. Moreover, if we hold, as John Law (2009) does, that it is interpretations all the way down, the choice of interpretations becomes the problem. On what grounds do we come to the conclusion that the native's account of what he is doing is a better, more insightful, more fertile a basis for social science reporting than the interpretations of the social scientist? We hardly want to say that the native is engaged in doing social science, do we? What he or she is doing is answering questions and performing routine activities as part of their practical now-being-observed-by-the-social-scientist daily lives.

Second, the argument ignores the findings of those parts of Linguistics and the social sciences which have studied meaning and its resolution in everyday language use. These studies point to an array of practical methods which those co-present in some setting call upon to manage and determine meaning in context. In as much as they sustain interaction at all (and Geertz's (1993) descriptions of the difficulties and fragilities of so doing are revealing), fieldworkers and their informants achieve a here and now, in this situation and setting, common sense understanding of what is going on. And, as all fieldworkers know, this working, local knowledge (different from but bearing some family resemblance to the native's working, local knowledge) is all that they have to go on to form their descriptions. What this illuminates is not the political nature of the bridge thrown over the cultural gap between researcher and researched but its *practical* nature. Doing the work of fieldwork investigation is just another domain of practical action, and managed in and through the methods and practices which all social actors have for providing and assessing what are subjective and what are objective accounts and descriptions. The objectivity and subjectivity of accounts and descriptions found within social activities are produced through deployment of and adherence to such conventionalised and commonsense practices.

Accepting all this does not mean that fieldworkers (*and* their informants) cannot be crass, boorish, prone to misjudgement, misunderstanding and distortion. But it does not make fieldwork inevitably so. Neither does it imply that making sense of some unfamiliar culture is not hard; that somehow it is easy just to slip in and immerse oneself. All fieldworkers know the uncertainty, disorientation and sense of being at a loss what to do which they feel on entering the field. (The further the cultural distance the research site is from the researcher's home base, the greater these feelings). But, as feelings, these are no different to those felt by any novice, newcomer, stranger. Moreover, they are addressed and resolved in much the same way.

Two things follow from what we have just said. First, reflexivity is not a special problem for fieldwork in Qualitative Sociology. It is everyone's problem. Second, its resolution is not a matter of imposing distortion, bias and politics, but instead a matter of the practical management first of social interaction in the setting, and second the construction of sociological accounts of what was encountered there. It becomes, that is, an issue of the practical management of routine sociologising.

PRIORITISING THE SUBJECTIVE

Earlier we attributed the move from objectivism to perspectivism in the social sciences to a predisposition to moral hypochondria. And in part that is so. Disciplines so determined to be on the side of right are likely to be vulnerable to claims from others to the moral high ground. But it was not all this. There was, in addition, something in the very logic of the way that the turn to subjectivity was introduced into the disciplines which contributed as well. Well over half a century ago, a paper which deserves much greater celebration and prominence than it has had, Egon Bittner identified this logic. In *Objectivity and Realism in Sociology,* Bittner

(1973) expressed the fear that rejection of the operationalisation of meaning and proceduralising of formal reason, ideas which were in place and dominant in American Sociology in the immediate post-Second World War period would lead to another, equally elusive and illusory aspiration, namely that of authentic descriptions grounded in subjective experience. For Bittner, the substitution of subjectivity for objectivity was unnecessary. In addition, forcing a choice would, in all likelihood, lead to the consequence that the 'subjectivity' which became prized would actually be that of the sociological researcher. As we have just seen, this is exactly what has happened.

The search for 'authenticity' was the primary driver for the proposed shift to the subjective, where authenticity was assured by immersion in and engagement with the setting under view. The aim was the presentation of social reality as seen from within rather than from without. In Bittner's view, this would become an objective which, in practice, would be frustrated by the fact that the researcher would enter the field bearing a burden of preconceptions drawn from Sociology. The end result would inevitably be creation of a substantial disparity between the experience of inhabitants of the social setting and that of the visiting researcher would become integral to the methodology's practice. In this way, the search for authenticity, though inspired by Phenomenology, would become a distortion, or even abortion, of the phenomenological project.

For Bittner, rushing to embrace the fullest form of subjectivity would be likely only to bring its own troubles. First, there is the risk that what will dominate investigative interests are the enthusiasms and/or preconceptions of the investigator. Even if this is avoided, the desire to present an account of reality from the point of view of the actor must "return", as Bittner puts it, to an "objectiveness" but one that this time is grounded in intuitions gained through 'being there'. But this warrant, this being there, can only come at a cost.

> *The greater the effort to enhance the adequacy of observation on counts such as acceptance, transfer of trust, subtlety, perspicacity, open-mindedness, patience and scope, the less likely that serious, searching questions will be asked about that which has come to view by means of all this loving care.....It is not whether he observes well or poorly that matters but the circumstance of his being an outside observer with all the consequences issuing from it (Bittner 1973 p.119)*

This unease was justified. As we have seen, reflexive ethnography commits the very mistake Bittner points to, namely of assuming that because of the intervention of the sociologist as an observer of the social setting and the social and cultural distance between the sociological observer and the members of the society under study, reflection on the researcher's own experience *vis a vis* that setting must be a central and critical concern when describing social life in some setting. To use the image that is most often deployed when explaining why this must be so, without an understanding of the lens through which the observations are focused, there is no possibility of compensating for any partiality or distortion of the sociality under view.

This mistake underlies the conundrum of how the researcher is to offer an analysis which both respects the view of social reality as seen from within and is recognisably and properly sociological. How can you be both inside and outside at the same time? How can you capture and represent *their* interpretations within the framework of *your* interpretation? How do you treat their point of view with respect without sliding into cultural relativism or an interminable regression, or by distorting their point of view through your own presuppositions?

Bittner acutely foresaw that attempts to correct positivism's misrepresentation of society in the name of subjectivity-as-experience would induce comparable, though substantively different, distortions. Positivist objectivism sought to access social reality through faithfulness to methods designed to depersonalise inquiry.

The inversion of that position envisages access to social reality through the personalising of inquiry, through faithfulness to the subject. Neither approach encapsulated what Bittner considered the genuine, phenomenologically appropriate orientation of *faithfulness to the object*, which in this instance would be to social reality as experienced from within its midst. For Bittner, 'objective' and 'subjective' are not to be counterposed and polarised and so we are not forced to choose between them. Rather, the challenge is to achieve greater clarity about their relationship; that is, the proclaimed objectivity of social reality as it is present in social settings and intelligible to those who inhabit those settings.

The error Bittner is pointing to consists in the mistaken assumption that because experience is primeordial within social life, it must have primacy for sociological descriptions. Whereas, of course, the aim of inquiry conducted in this way is not to seek to persuade anyone that social reality is really only the subject's motile artefact any more than it is to demonstrate that determination of the real structures of social life is obstructed by layers of subjective misconstrual. As Bittner saw it, the need was to do justice to the patent *and overwhelmingly unquestioned* objectivity that social structures do have in our daily lives. In this, Bittner was drawing upon Schutz' characterisation of the natural attitude of everyday life

> *By the everyday world is to be understood that province of reality which the wide awake and normal adult simply takes for granted in the attitude of commonsense. By this taken-for-grantedness, we designate everything which we experience as unquestionable; every state of affairs is for us unproblematic until further notice (Schutz & Luckmann 1974 pp. 3-4)*

As we have noted, Bittner is clear that Phenomenology (together with its troublesome step-child Heideggerian Existentialism) was the inspiration behind the turn to the subjective. However, the elaboration of what this entails led to the situation described earlier. The phenomenological project was built on the assumption that the life world, the world of everyday social life, is available to observation and understanding *prior to* the production of any scientific or analytic scheme for its further examination. Moreover, phenomenological inquiry is needed for the clarification required as a propadeutic to the 'understanding' of social reality through the adoption of scientific (or at least theoretical and methodological) principles. Among other things, this inquiry would set standards to fix what 'understanding' was to be. Phenomenological investigation is, then, *prior to* understanding of social life through the adoption and operationalisation of some set of methods and/or principles. The risk for any objectivist approach is that, without such secure determination of correct standards and ways of understanding, social reality will remain unknown. For Phenomenology, on the other hand, if social inquiry is stipulated to be *apriori,* then sight might well be lost of the social reality that is the site and setting of the inquirer's own inquiry. An approach to the study of social life chosen *apriori,* might simply fail to recognise that the understanding of social reality is present in social settings and available to those resident there. It is on this understanding that the affairs of everyday social life actually run. As the struggles with it make abundantly clear, the conundrum of reflexivity confronts us only because of the assumption that the social researcher is seeking a special, primordial understanding of social reality. Bittner diagnosed the importance and consequences of this assumption well before reflexivity became the *topic du jour* that it is now.

Drawing It All Together

We have been examining just one strand of the debate over reflexivity in social science. One which might fall under the 'positional' rather than the 'textual' categorisation Doug Macbeth (2001) uses. We have suggested that the search for some special form of methodological reflexivity as part of a distinct attitude towards research engagement which will overcome the privileging of outsider, analytic, objectivist views is both naive and misguided. There is no coherence to the claim that some set of interpretations and descriptions is reflexive and some other is not. All interpretation and description is reflexive, including those in ordinary talk

or in formal institutionalised settings such as science. It makes no sense to define some forms of Sociology as being reflexive and non-reflexive and set them against each other, just as it makes no sense to contrast science and commonsense as unreflexive and reflexive. All forms of commonsense reasoning rest upon reflexivity and its management.

This conclusion has two implications. First, it opens up the activity of practical sociologising as a topic for enquiry. We can turn to sociological reasoning as instances of the management and resolution of the reflexivity which is essential to all practical activity. What is 'the work' of field work? What is 'the work of participant observation' and how can the 'members' methods' that comprise this work be best described? To do this is to do no more than take an analytic interest in the mundane reasoning of Qualitative Sociology. Of course, as Michael Lynch (2000) suggests in the summary of his mammoth cataloguing of reflexivity, such descriptions are likely to be of little or no interest to fieldworkers, pointing as they will to the mundane, taken for granted, culturally invisible, ordinary features of sociological life. Such descriptions will be "essentially uninteresting" and as such all the more testimony to the power to sustain social life of the phenomena they depict.

The second implication is that in levelling down reflexive ethnography from the privileged position it is given, its potential to be revelatory, politically radical and enlightening will have to be set aside. If ethnography can have no special claim to reflexivity then it loses its aura. With that loss would also go any hopes to use it as the vehicle for political action. As Lynch says, such action and the ....."(h)opes for enlightenment and political emancipation (which it carries) would then return to the streets where they belong" (2000 p. 48).