

PAUL RABINOW AND GEORGE E. MARCUS WITH JAMES D. FAUBION AND TOBIAS REES. *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008. Pp.152. ISBN: 978-0-82-234370-7.

Put a couple of anthropology's great names around one table, add a couple of younger anthropologists and let them loose. The result is a stimulating discussion very reminiscent of the hallway discussions of the late 60s and early 70s. At that time the gap between faculty and students was huge, as the discussants remind us, and an intellectual revolution was going on globally. Both Rabinow and Marcus were part of that revolution and now they are senior professors attempting to continue that revolution and refusing to grow old—as Marcus himself reminds the reader. In the turmoil of the late 60s, received social science wisdom was questioned everywhere, but the content of what was 'received' had enormous variation. In different departments, not to mention different continents or countries, the critics and the criticised were different. These differences provide the dialogues of *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary* with special attraction. The very local departmental politics, the power structures centred on key figures, and the intellectual landscape and its local flavour become very visible.

Everything began with *Writing Culture* (1986); this book begins with it and the first footnote refers to it. The stated aim of 'the *Writing Culture* critique' was to deparochialise American anthropology and open it up to trends in European thinking. Marcus had studied at Harvard, which had retreated to a very traditional anthropology, while Rabinow spent his postgraduate years in much livelier and more open Chicago. Despite the differences, the institutional settings had some common features: for example, both had strong father figures whose shadows loom above the discussants. The big intellectual project of the time, of which *Writing Culture* was a part, was an attempt to get rid of anthropological research practices created by Malinowski and Boas (sic!). Despite their differences, the discussants see that the practice consisting of ethnographic fieldwork in bounded cultural wholes is a thing of the past. It came as a surprise for the discussants that the father figures did not acknowledge their attempted scientific revolution but left their involvement in the discussion, as Geertz did, to a few 'contemptuous footnotes' or Sahlins writing pamphlets mocking the non-canonical (to him) French. Patricide failed and the discussants regret the way these father figures 'foreclosed their own futures'.

What about the future Marcus and Rabinow are attempting to design? In their attempt to get rid of the central methodological concept of fieldwork, they end up in great trouble. Limiting the concept to long-term residence in one address, where culture was supposedly found, they in fact close their eyes to the real practices which have produced most of the exemplary ethnographies. These studies have relied on multiple kinds of data, and not only on empirical observations in the field. A second objection can be raised to their way of seeing the classic objects of ethnographic research as located 'out of time'. One could well claim that Raymond Firth's *We the Tikopia* was very 'contemporary' and based on real events in time, not out of it. The way out of ethnographic timelessness would, according to discussants, be to focus on the 'contemporary'. As Rabinow claims, this forces one to abandon concepts of culture and society, because everything appears as assemblage, apparatus, event, actual, contraption and emergent. But... something is lurking there which neither Rabinow nor Marcus can eradicate: the term they recommend

as a replacement for 'culture' is 'cultural', to which they even assign the status of 'diacritic of anthropology'. The plethora of new concepts has led to an old one, although in a slightly modified form.

Something similar happens to the long-cherished and despised fieldwork. Paying attention to talking points—which have a short half life—or advertising as objects of ethnographic research, still requires something which is a product of the field work tradition. The discussants borrow Nietzsche's concept of 'untimely' to characterise the essence of anthropological analysis. In the analysis of the contemporary, untimely marks a critical distance from the present that seeks to establish a relationship with it that is different from the reigning opinion. Wasn't that the whole aim of traditional fieldwork?

As a document of the history of one part of anthropology the book is very interesting. It is infested with positional views, but those positions are made transparent. From a different position, the developments since the glory days of *Writing Culture* as well as its reception seem to display a great variation. Thus the book encourages, even forces comments as well as critical look at one's own projects. It also leaves one waiting for the exemplary ethnographic monograph written along the lines envisioned in the book.

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