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What has anthropology learned from the anthropology of colonialism?

The emergence of the anthropology of colonialism in the 1990s has stimulated and enhanced critical reflection on the cultural and historical embedding of the discipline of anthropology, offering what is in effect a historiography of the discipline's present. How has this historical consciousness changed the contours of the discipline? Has it allowed anthropologists to critically distance their discipline from its intimate involvement with the world of modernity, development and the welfare state, as it first emerged under colonial rule? Have anthropologists learned that, instead of targeting and thus essentialising otherness, we should now study the processes by which human differences are constructed, hierarchised and negotiated? This presentation focuses on recent developments in European and North American anthropology in order to discuss the potential effects of the anthropology of colonialism's historical consciousness on anthropological ontologies (epitomised by current discussions on 'indigenous peoples'), epistemologies (in reconceptualising 'field' and 'method') and ethics. It thus tries to outline the ways in which the critical promise of the anthropology of colonialism faces the obstacles that the present-day heritage of colonialism puts in the way of realising its future potential.

Key words colonialism, representation, classification, indigeneity, ethnographic methods, ethics

Introduction

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the English-speaking anthropological world was considerably shaken up by the rise of a host of anthropological studies of the colonial past. Although inspired by critics from both within and outside of the discipline,¹ and prepared by a few relatively isolated predecessors,² the mass of what came to be called the anthropology of colonialism accumulated in the decade after 1985.³ Since then, anthropological studies of colonialism have become an accepted part of disciplinary meetings and stimulated further interdisciplinary research among younger generations of scholars. To some extent, one might argue that they have infused the discipline with a stronger historical consciousness. Yet, have they made a real difference, for instance

1 Such as Johannes Fabian (1983), Ranajit Guha (1982) and Edward Said (1978).

2 See Asad (1973), Etienne and Leacock (1980), and some of the work later collected in Cohn (1987b).

3 For some of the more important book-length studies from this period, see Breckenridge and Van der Veer (1993), Breman (1989), Comaroff and Comaroff (1991), Cooper and Stoler (1989), Dirks (1992, 1993), Fabian (1986), Obeyesekere (1992), Pels and Salemink (1994b), Sahlin (1985, 1995), Stocking (1991), Stoler (1995 [1985]), Taussig (1987), Thomas (1991, 1994), and Van der Veer (1995).

as compared to contemporaneous developments such as the literary turn, the turn to globalisation, or the turn to science and technology studies? Have we actually learned to live with our colonial legacies? Another decade later, it seems useful to ask what the anthropology of colonialism has taught anthropologists in general, and whether anthropologists have been willing and able to learn from it.

In 1997, I concluded an overview of the anthropology of colonialism with the suggestion that the anthropology of colonialism is also an anthropology of anthropology, and that it provides us with a historiography of the discipline's present (Pels 1997: 177) – allowing us to consider alternatives to the ways in which the discipline was formed and which continue to determine present practices. By showing how anthropology arose from imperialism and colonial hegemony as well as how it contributed to its critique, anthropologists of colonialism admonished us to study the ways in which the heritage of modern politics, development and welfare, as it emerged under twentieth-century colonial rule, infused anthropology today. What, then, has such an anthropology of colonialism taught us about doing anthropology in the present? And have anthropologists in general been heeding these lessons? My answers will be restricted by a relatively narrow body of literature and a regrettable dearth of engagement with anthropological traditions other than the Northern English-language ones. I hope, nevertheless, that my suggestions will be sufficiently general to stimulate further debate on what has recently been described as 'world anthropologies', away from the sometimes ethnocentric conceptions of what anthropology is and can be about (World Anthropologies Network 2003; see also Krotz 1997; Van Bremen and Shimizu 1999).

I think the short answer to the first question – what the anthropology of colonialism has taught anthropologists in general – is that, while anthropology emerged as an attempt to scientifically classify groups of human beings as different and therefore separate (the savage from the civilised, the literate from the illiterate, the traditional from the modern), the anthropology of colonialism has taught us that these classifications both indicate and obscure practical historical relationships, usually stretching back into history well before the classifications themselves became academically established representations of 'others'. The savage and the civilised never existed in separation: their definition itself already marked a relationship. In other words, the anthropology of colonialism teaches us that *all* of the major features that distinguish anthropology today – objects like 'culture' or 'development', methods like participatory fieldwork, or an ethics of cross-cultural respect – have to be understood as historical relationships before they can be treated as objects, tools or rules of the discipline.

The answer to the second question – what we have been able to learn from the anthropology of colonialism – is, I think, less straightforward: while we find laudable efforts within anthropology to distance ourselves from a heritage of colonial dispositions, our freshly minted consciousness of how we are embedded in history itself shows us how difficult this effort at distancing is. Instead, anthropologists – at least seen from my part of the world – seem to find themselves more and more caught up in dilemmas of an ontological, epistemological and moral nature, dilemmas produced by the persistence of salient parts of the colonial heritage, both within the discipline and, more importantly, outside it. This heritage of colonialism – a heritage of specific modes of state-craft that have established themselves firmly in the hegemonic ethic of research in today's institutions of learning – is therefore difficult to do away with. It stubbornly resists a number of the more important lessons of the anthropology of colonialism, and

forces anthropologists into pragmatic and sometimes painful adjustments to its often antiquated demands.

This essay discusses these two short answers in three steps: the first, dealing with some of the objects and ontologies of anthropology; the second, with its methods and epistemologies; and the third, by zooming in on anthropological ethics today. I do not pretend to say much that is new, beyond arguing that the view from the anthropology of colonialism is useful to place in perspective certain recent trends in anthropology in general.

Objects and ontologies: the past catching up with the present

What, one may ask, was the principal object of the anthropology of colonialism? I suggest it was the study of the representations of the colonised by the colonisers *in the context of* the practical engagement and entanglement of the two.⁴ Ann Stoler and Fred Cooper pointed out that binary representations of us and them (often in racial terms) worked as ideological operators that, on the one hand, obscured far more multiplex entanglements of race and ethnicity, gender and class, while on the other they were used to organise these relationships, both at home and in the colonies (Cooper and Stoler 1997). If, therefore, the dichotomous representations of colonisers versus colonised were the dominant discourse in which the ideals of colonial society were formulated, the anthropology of colonialism took the conditions of possibility of such oppositions, and the modes of production of knowledge that characterised the historical relationships from which they emerged, as its object. This distinguishes the anthropology of colonialism from the classical history of anthropology, since the former starts from the assumption that 'it is better to regard academic anthropology as a specific instance of ethnographic practice rather than the other way around' (Pels and Saleminck 1994a: 5). Instead of taking academic anthropology as a phenomenon *sui generis*, the anthropology of colonialism studied the ethnographic practices that provided the conditions of possibility for its classifications of colonisers and colonised. These conditions were not merely situated in a specific metropolitan environment, but emerged all over the globe: the anthropology of colonialism focused on a *multi-sited* object of study, to be found in the sociocultural and historical relationships that connected these different sites (Pels 1997; see also Marcus 1995). These sites included, but were not limited to, the academic locations of anthropology, and therefore, the anthropology of colonialism constructs an object that is not *external to* but constitutive of anthropology (Thomas 1994: 192). Instead of treating Australian aborigines, Trobrianders or Nuer as 'cases' to be understood from the 'proper' perspective of Eurocentric metropolitan expertise, the anthropology of colonialism asked how Euroamerican ethnic classifications emerged from its practical historical engagements with such so-called cultural particulars.

4 This study of representations-in-context explains why scholars studying colonialism were some of the first critics of the 'literary turn' in anthropology: their studies told them that one cannot expect to change unequal power relationships only by experimenting with the representations of otherness (see Asad 1994; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Fabian 1991; Pels and Saleminck 1994a; Said 1989). Such critical engagements with textuality today result, among other things, in much broader diagnoses of what it means to 'rule by expertise' (Mitchell 2002; Mosse 2005).

This delineation of object did away with the simple-minded discussion about whether anthropologists had been complicit with colonial rule or not (Pels and Salemink 1994a) and turned towards an awareness of more complicated entanglements: even if Alfred Haddon was critical of the 'red hand of British aggression', his elders convinced him that it was not wise to publish such statements (see Stocking 1993); while Bronislaw Malinowski may have taught us more about our shared humanity with Trobriand islanders than anybody else, he was savvy enough to sell Trobrianders in the British publishing market as 'savages'; and while our colleagues of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute may have harboured Left-wing leanings and sympathised with African nationalism, they needed to be useful to the Rhodesian colonial establishment at the same time (Schumaker 2001). In short, the anthropology of colonialism taught us that it is difficult *not* to think in terms of the ontologies that are globally dominant in one's own time, even if the practical relationships on which they are based refute them empirically. In fact, the temporal distance that the anthropology of colonialism allowed us to take towards the colonial ontologies dominant during the rise of anthropology as an academic discipline facilitated the research that led to such conclusions. The anthropology of colonialism was not, *pace* the views of a number of critics, an effort to stop doing fieldwork and turn to history instead, but an effort to develop a critical understanding of our work in the present. That critical understanding is never more needed than today, when, on the one hand, more and more anthropologists are engaged in practical work outside the academy, and on the other, an increasing number of colleagues complain about the loss of respect for the discipline within the academic world. While today's 'applied' anthropology is often practised without much awareness of anthropology's colonial practice, the loss of respect for the discipline has much to do with the fact that we find dominant perspectives that date back to colonial times in full swing today – perspectives that have been discarded by a majority of today's anthropologists in the meantime.

One such group of ontological assumptions derives from the imaginary geography of colonial anthropology characterised by the presupposition that human diversity has to be represented in terms of discrete ethnic units that normally occupy equally discrete territories – an imagination based in the cultural presuppositions underlying modern nation-states (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Stolcke 1995). This *ontology of spatial discreteness* was built into the radical dichotomies of East and West of orientalist discourse, its focus on texts shaping the work of (for instance) Friedrich Max Müller as well as European colonial relationships with the literate elites of Near, Central and East Asia (cf. Said 1978). When the focus on oriental texts gave way, in the course of the consolidation of colonial rule, to the biopolitical classification of the populations of colonial states in terms of a statistical survey, this ontology of spatially discrete objects reappeared in, for example, the 'castes and tribes'-volumes produced in Victorian India (cf. Pels 1999b). In the United States, the emergence of the 'mosaic conception of culture' in the first half of the twentieth century also defined human difference in terms of spatially discrete units – as was, for example, graphically illustrated by G.P. Murdock's fantasy map of African 'tribes' in the territorial locations they would have occupied had colonialism not drawn other lines (totally ignoring the massive migrations that the African continent witnessed in pre-colonial times). The ontology of spatial discreteness is still with us in academia, as Gupta and Ferguson (1992) have convincingly argued. However, it may be even more important that this dominant ontology has become widespread throughout civil societies in the post-Cold War period, to the

extent that spatially discrete notions of nationality, culture, indigeneity, autochthony or aboriginality have now monopolised talk of differences between human beings (see Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005; Stolcke 1995) – a worldwide homogenisation, not of identities, but of their modes of identification.⁵

One way in which this has hit the recent academic practice of anthropology is in the form of discussions about ‘indigenous peoples’, in which anthropologists still predominantly tend to commit themselves to the defence of the interests of such peoples against powerful states or other dominant groups. ‘Being indigenous’ is, of course, one of the core concepts of anthropology from its inception. British ethnology arose out of the Aborigines Protection Society and its efforts to both study and salvage the culture of those human beings who were thought to be more original settlers of the globe and hence closer to our common evolutionary origin than ourselves. Early anthropologists commonly focused on such peoples, whether this concerned ‘Celts’ in Britain, ‘Kols’ or ‘Dravidians’ in India, ‘Indians’ in North America or the ‘Ainu’ in Japan – partly because they posed a problem to the assumption of cultural unity within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state. Later colonial strategies of erecting an administration on the basis of tradition (such as ‘indirect rule’) continued this focus on how to distinguish the indigenous from the exogenous, and were continued after decolonisation, when ‘new nations’ had to construct their own origins and position themselves vis-à-vis their internal minorities in the process. Today, in the United Nations’ Second International Decade of Indigenous Peoples, one might think we are far more advanced in our dealings with these often colonially-created minorities. However, some of the ontological dilemmas formed during colonialism still haunt our discussions.

Adam Kuper, for example, argued that our commitment to a concept of indigeneity and indigenous activism would imply a ‘return of the native’ – or, in other words, the reintroduction of an obsolete colonial discourse of racism and essentialism which the academic discipline was supposed to have discarded. He counselled that we abolish such terms from our analytical vocabulary to safeguard the discipline’s academic and scientific integrity (Kuper 2003). Alan Barnard has recently countered this by saying that in the field of politics and the law, a ‘polythetic’ concept of indigeneity is quite useful for anthropologists committed to defending such peoples’ interests, and that anthropologists should retain the notion, but not as a scientific concept (Barnard 2006). This debate pinpoints precisely the paradoxes I want to outline for our current situation. Kuper’s suggestion to discard as unscientific the notions by which the people we want to understand identify themselves is problematic, at an empirical level as much as for its impossible wish for a neutral or innocent descriptive vocabulary. Barnard’s stance, however – that one can maintain the anthropologists’ ‘expert’ status vis-à-vis lay audiences by setting an ‘in-house’ academic language against another, political or legal language to be employed outside the ‘pure’ anthropological sphere – is academically, politically and ethically questionable (Wolfe 2006: 25–6). Whatever the case, it becomes quite obvious from this discussion that the classification of people as ‘indigenous’ does not refer to any essence of their being but to a historical relationship, which implicitly reproduces the assumption that the nation-state is the source of sovereignty

5 We should therefore neither emphasise global homogenisation (Hamelink 1983; McLuhan 1994 [1964]) nor global heterogeneity (Appadurai 1996), but the forms of becoming increasingly more heterogeneous in the same way.

and the locus of decision-making that circumscribes such indigenous peoples' agency (see Kenrick 2006; Thuen 2006; Zips 2006). While, on the one hand, many people subscribe to the classical idea that anthropologists are supposed to use only concepts that provide an unambiguous, 'expert' reference to the real essence of the people described (like Kuper, or the average lawyer in a court case involving indigenous claims – see Thuen 2004), on the other, those who counter this essentialist ontology inherited from colonial times (such as Barnard) do so by, paradoxically, reviving its classifications in the present. A way out seems difficult to find, since we need these essentialisations to convince our external audience, but its deconstructions to convince ourselves.

Another, equally if not more disconcerting manifestation of the colonial ontology of spatial discreteness can be found in the current career of the concept of culture – now often seen as having outlived its academic uses and becoming an embarrassment to anthropology instead (but see, for instance, Brumann 1999). Notions of nationality, culture, indigeneity, autochthony or aboriginality are, in many cases, supported by 'cultural fundamentalism' (Stolcke 1995). This, in its essence, implies the assumption that different cultural groups cannot occupy the same territory peacefully unless one submits to the other – a naturalisation of xenophobia that is as divorced from empirical reality as it is frightening in its ideological consequences. Quite obviously, the assumption again derives from the dominant practice of nation-states' attempts to homogenise peoples within their territory, but it has only come to overshadow the ideological battle between a majority of governments and minority groups within nation-states all over the globe *after* other dominant folk-theories of human difference – especially racism and developmentalism – lost force. More and more people are differentiating themselves from others by the argument that 'having their own' culture – a form of modern 'possessive individualism' (Handler 1986) – somehow entitles them to more privileges within the specific territory in which they live. Again, in recent discussions, one solution sought is to say that 'culture is no excuse' whatsoever (see Rapport 2003). That, however, fails to define out of existence the human differences that go beyond the 'social', and that anthropologists are also bound to interpret in an expert way. Are we to declare the whole field that we used to describe with 'culture' to be an illusion? Even if I refrain now from answering the question whether the notion of 'culture' has to be salvaged or not, can we afford to tell people who ask us to explain what 'the culture' of 'those people' is that they don't know what they're talking about? It seems rather tortuous to have to argue that the culture concept they are using is obsolete, mostly conservative, and that it has lost much of the critical functions it carried in the late colonial period. That, again, proves the point I am trying to make.

What seems to be happening in any case is that we are deconstructing – or, what amounts to almost the same thing, expertly historicising – identities in a world where culture, aboriginality, identity and autochthony are increasingly essentialised in legal, political or consumerist ways. In such a world, to be critical of such essentialised identities often means that this anti-essentialist 'expertise' is either regarded as irrelevant, or as proving that such identities do not exist and can be prohibited or ignored. What we could have learned from the anthropology of colonialism is that ethnographic representations always derive from specific historical relationships (even if the tendency to essentialise these into definitions of otherness has always obscured them – see Pels and Salemink 1999). What seems, however, difficult to learn is how to be an expert anti-essentialist and to display our historical awareness without the 'outside' world

telling us that our representations (or those of the people we try to assist in representing themselves) are irrelevant.

There is, of course, another set of ontological assumptions that stem from colonial times and that are still very much with us: the definitions of human difference based on *temporal inequality* (cf. Fabian 1983). This takes two basic forms, often standing in contradiction to each other: the definition of 'us' as modern, that is, as having made an irreversible break with a past defined as 'traditional'; and the definition of people standing on a continuum of linear 'development', where some are described as more 'present' or 'advanced' than others. The two often went together, as in an evolutionist perspective where the continuum is translated into discrete differences, radically setting savage and barbarian against the civilised, the 'primitive' against the modern, or *Gemeinschaft* against *Gesellschaft*. They also sometimes contradict each other, since while the presupposition of 'development' policy is that it is possible for people to move along a continuum that should, ideally, make all people equally developed, this continuous nature of 'development' is often betrayed by defining the people who are to be developed as 'traditional', or not belonging to 'our' time – in other words, by setting them in a dichotomous opposition to the end-point of being 'developed'. (What Homi Bhabha referred to as condemning certain people to the state of being permanently 'not quite, not white' [1994: 92].) Critics of 'development' argue, therefore, that policies based on the concept itself *make* people unequal (see, for example, Esteva 1992), while the proponents of such policies assume that exactly the opposite is bound to occur.

It may be unfair to accuse whole organisations whose *raison d'être* is based on benevolence of a conspiracy to discriminate, but it nevertheless remains true that the 'development industry' has not discarded the late colonial conception that certain people are backward and that they can be 'developed'. Development discourse still carries the 'future positive' conviction that development cannot but be beneficial – despite overwhelming evidence that development policy has rarely achieved the goals it set itself.⁶ The development industry's assumption that it is possible to deliver benefits while retaining the sovereign locus of decision of how benefits are to be defined has not been changed fundamentally by efforts towards 'participatory' development (Carmen 1992), and retains, therefore, the basic power structures of Victorian notions of 'improvement' and *mission civilisatrice*. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that this is one of the few articles of faith that have survived the European secularisation of Christianity (the other being the notion that the state and/or the market have the right, duty or potential to act as God). This secularisation of Christian charity into worldly development, of course, took place in the late colonial period (from the 1920s to the 1950s), very often under the aegis of Christian missionary organisations. Again, anthropologists' empirical demonstrations – that no notion of 'development' has the power to lift itself by its own hair out of the historical relationships in which it cannot but reaffirm the inequalities between benefactors and beneficiaries of development – are bound to run into development practitioners' firm conviction that such anthropologists are just being relativist and obstructionist, and plainly refuse to make their science into a relevant business.

6 See Mosse (2005) for the most recent review of such processes. I adopt the term 'future positive' from his brilliant account, and fully subscribe to his argument that development policy, while not achieving its aims, nevertheless does 'develop' peoples' lives in ways that the development industry's managers often find hard to acknowledge.

It is important, however, to point out that this state of affairs is not the result of such a plain refusal to be socially relevant, or of bad scientific or paradigmatic choices. It is not a mental affectation – the kind of ‘epistemological hypochondria’ that Clifford Geertz once observed among his younger US colleagues, resulting from a chronic lack of certainty about our scholarly or expert capacities (and perhaps fuelled by an excess of relativism; see Geertz 1988: 71). It is, instead, a far more serious *social* and *historical* condition, one that results from our recognition of the fact that, once anthropologists become impatient of mere academic discourse and venture out in the streets, they will inevitably run into a heritage of colonialism that the postcolonial world still keeps alive. This heritage of colonialism frustrates the efforts of many anthropologists to make their current assessment of what the world is like clear to extra-academic audiences, since the terms of reference of these audiences are based on conceptions of humanity (we think) we have discarded. This also has a lot to do with the fact that the globally dominant *ways* of looking at humanity have not advanced beyond colonial epistemologies as much as many of us would have liked them to.

Methods and epistemologies: the strategic illusion

Parallel to the question with which I started the previous section, one might ask what was the principal *methodological* point of the anthropology of colonialism, and whether it has registered sufficiently within the discipline and outside it. Again, a short answer would be that the anthropology of colonialism has studied method not so much in terms of ‘what to do’ when doing research, but in terms of the ways in which the invocation of certain methodological principles has contributed to the essentialisation of certain subject positions and the obscuring of certain historical relationships. If the ontological tendencies of colonial discourse were mostly meant to define ‘them’, the epistemological work of ‘methods’ in colonial circumstances was mostly directed at defining ‘us’ – as rational, controlled, ‘objective’ observers.⁷ This observation also helps us to better understand why the anthropology of colonialism has often been interpreted as undermining the very identity of the discipline, in the sense of the often-heard (but rarely read) complaint that anthropologists of colonialism have reneged on the basic feature of anthropological method and self-identity: ethnographic fieldwork. Anthropologists of colonialism, we hear in the corridors, have lost themselves too much in archives and texts, and have failed to maintain the proper distinction of ‘our’ discipline towards others. To be sure, we all can cite examples of histories, ethnographies or textual analyses that severely affront some of the more exacting standards of anthropological methodology. Such qualms should not, however, obscure one of the more important contributions of the anthropology of colonialism to our general understanding of anthropological epistemology and method: the way that the historicising of method by anthropologists of colonialism has shown that the *validity* of anthropological understanding – and, *mutatis mutandis*, of history and social science in general – is primarily a product of historical, and only secondarily of methodical relationships. This becomes obvious once we grant that our ‘field’ is not just a distant strategic target

7 The most profound analysis of how problematic this assumption of rationality was in colonial times – and how important our understanding of the practices of colonial ‘exploration’ is to current anthropology – is Johannes Fabian’s wonderful *Out of Our Minds* (2005).

of study 'out there', but a social construct in which our engagement is just the most recent phase in a history of interventions; that the attempt to understand this social construct necessitates interdisciplinarity, and especially literary critique combined with history and social science; and that 'method' then turns out to be, not a set of controlled and transparent acts by which we disengage from the social relationships we study, but a continuation of the historical relationships in which people 'like us' (academically trained subjects, experts, strangers, elites) have intervened in these relationships since colonial times.

Many anthropologists determined the contours of their 'field' by considering what would be the most effective critique of his or her own society's ethnocentric assumptions – for example, when Bronislaw Malinowski drew Western conceptions of *homo economicus* into the composition of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1978 [1922]), and Margaret Mead turned *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) into a reflection on typically North American problems with puberty and adolescence. It is obvious that previous texts, experiences and customs have always co-produced the field which the ethnographer chose and/or outlined as the place to do research. This conception of the field as a historical relationship between different sets of values and practices was radicalised by the anthropology of colonialism – not least, by studying how the colonial enterprise was intertwined with the development of 'field sciences' such as botany, geography and anthropology. Hence the different emphases put by anthropologists of colonialism on *texts*: while contributing to what was called the 'literary turn in anthropology',⁸ anthropologists of colonialism paid as much, and perhaps even more, attention to the ways in which, for example, letters or newspapers (Stoler 1992), diaries, travelogues and dictionaries (Fabian 1985, 1986), or missionary or bureaucratic reports (Clifford 1982; Pels 1994; Schulte Nordholt 1999), *produced* the 'fields' within which ethnographic methods were to be employed. Thus, they expanded the anthropological conception of the field by pointing out that both anthropological definitions of the field and the self-understandings of the people studied included 'pre-texts' that defined the content of knowledge to be gathered in subsequent phases of producing knowledge (Dirks 1999). Such 'inventions of tradition' included texts as contexts of the field of study, and thus radically broadened the validation of statements about the people studied, away from the relatively uncritical 'reading up on the literature' required of each PhD student, to the realisation that this literature was already always part of 'the field' – not just as anthropologists defined it, but as the people studied had incorporated its definitions of themselves, and the way they were incorporated in the larger historical relationships within which these texts were produced.

If the ethnographic authority of 'being there' was thus shown to be essentially incomplete, it was not out of a pure interest in intertextuality or dialogue⁹ but to reconstruct the material mediations of such constructions of the field – that is, whether the mode of the ethnographers' being there evoked memories and practices of trade, military violence, revenue extraction, or missionary presence (see Pels and Saleminck 1994a: 16; 1999). 'Memories of trade' could, indeed, persuade an ethnographer that it was not her 'being there' but the nineteenth-century arrival of a naturalist (in this case, Alfred Russel Wallace) that turned out to be the more significant moment to

8 See note 4.

9 The wishful thinking of 'dialogue', in particular, dominated many of the literary experiments in anthropology after 1986. For a critique, see Pool (1994).

understand the field in which she was engaged (Spyer 2000), and other monographs have circumscribed their field in terms of the previous arrival of a missionary (Pels 1999a; Steedly 1993). The historical consciousness of the anthropology of colonialism teaches us that a major part of the anthropological method consists of finding out in whose footsteps the researcher is treading, in the eyes of the academic audience as much as in those of the people researched. It allows for the question whether and how our representations of others differ from the explorers, traders, missionaries, colonial officials and development workers who went there before us, and why – that is, in whose interests and on the basis of what kind of historical relationships.

More important, however, for our further understanding of the validity of ethnography in particular, and for social research more generally, is that the historicising of method is indispensable for understanding the extent to which the people researched *have already adapted to our methods' modes of measuring*, and how this adaptation reveals or conceals what these people are up to at a particular historical moment. The *locus classicus* of this argument is, of course, Bernard S. Cohn's seminal essay on the census in colonial India, in which he showed how the census (as an ethnographic and statistical survey) in fact *generated* some of the identifications of caste and tribe on which the British government was to base its policy (Cohn 1987a [1970]). I have myself argued that the administrative ethnography of Morogoro District in Tanganyika (which involved, among others, the anthropologists of the Makerere Institute of Social Research in Uganda) itself generated the social relationships that it was meant to describe – not a mere 'invention of tradition', but the very generation of the habits and social networks that allow the people to be described to answer the ethnographer's questions (Pels 1994, 1996). To cut short a potentially long historical presentation of examples of such adaptations of societies to the modes by which they are measured: this is in fact what also happens when present-day 'audit systems' – in some ways, the successors to the statistical and ethnographic surveys of colonial states – are unleashed on African states by donor agencies like the IMF and the World Bank: the said societies, led by their elites, make themselves more 'auditable' by inventing all kinds of multiple modes of answering research questions required by donor agencies – but in ways that obscure and multiply, rather than make transparent, what is actually going on (cf. Anders 2004; Harper 2000; Power 1994).

The anthropology of colonialism therefore teaches us that the strategic distance from the people studied adopted by those who 'see like a state' (Scott 1998) – which includes the majority of the social researchers past and present – was, in most cases, already associated by the people studied with governmental or company activities that attempted to tax, develop, resettle or commercialise people in ways that they hadn't decided upon themselves – even when such research was governed by the best of strategic intentions. The anthropology of colonialism has often unmasked this 'strategic illusion' of thinking that one actually comes to know people better by adopting an objective, 'expert' distance towards the people defined as 'target' or 'object' (cf. Mitchell 2002).¹⁰ It did so by incorporating the history of colonial research methods into its attempts to understand the relationships between the colonial strategists and their colonised targets, but also – even in its most historical moments – by adopting the ethnographic

10 My excuse for coopting political scientists like James Scott and Timothy Mitchell in this argument is that their work reproduces and contributes to the main features of the anthropology of colonialism as sketched in this essay – unlike the majority of their disciplinary peers.

ideal of learning to reproduce (or, when that was impossible, reconstruct) 'native' competences and points of view. The ethnographic immersion into others' ways of life, and the learning of different competences that goes with it, can be defined as a 'tactical' rather than strategic manoeuvre, since 'a tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance' (de Certeau 1984: xix). In contrast, the strategic definition of the 'proper' place from which to survey exterior targets or objects and apply policy always already compromises the historical validity of the understanding of the 'native's' point of view beforehand when it disregards this ethnographic imperative – the need to know from the 'bottom up'.¹¹

One important reason why this lesson from the anthropology of colonialism has not been sufficiently heeded in the present is that this places the focus on the validity of research – in the sense of 'value-rich' rather than 'value-free' method – in an ethically ambivalent realm: a tactical engagement in the historical relationships between (colonial or postcolonial) strategists and the people they target can be regarded as a kind of spying just as much as it can be interpreted as a negotiation between those spheres of action to the benefit of all concerned (Pels 1999c: 112). A more important reason, however, seems to be that the expanded conception of the research field as studied by anthropologists of colonialism (among others) – incorporating, by necessity, a qualitative, tactical and open-ended methodology of reducing the historical distance between researchers and researched – cannot be easily accommodated within a globally dominant research ethic that still upholds the illusion of strategic distance, preferably materialised in terms of quantitative methods of research, in most funding agencies and universities (cf. Appadurai 1997). In a world in which the strategic illusion of an 'objective' separation between researchers and people studied is still dominant in social science, I can, of course, still try to teach my students to understand that when they interview people with a standard questionnaire, this will inevitably raise 'deep' historical memories of how such questionnaires were and are used by states or companies that want something out of you (be it taxes, ethnic incarceration, consumer choices, or simply registration for elections) and that these methods are therefore neither innocent nor transparent. However, this does not help my students much in a world where the use of such methods is more often than not accepted as the *sine qua non* of scientific status. The invocation of 'method' is perhaps the most important field in which, in a global perspective, the recognition of other, possibly equally valid, 'cultural diacritics' of research (Appadurai 1997: 60) are systematically denied validity. Again, the advances made by the anthropology of colonialism in understanding current global predicaments seem to run up against – this time epistemological – legacies from our colonial past. We have already seen that this raises question of validity, and therefore, of the relationships between values. A separation between epistemology and method on the one hand, and ethics on the other, seems, therefore, artificial. The separation itself is a result of the historical developments of anthropology, and therefore deserves separate attention.

11 While adapting this contrast from Michel de Certeau, I should underline that I do not share his romanticised image of the tactical vis-à-vis the strategic. The administrative ethnography of indirect rule in Africa, for example, can also be seen as a tactical engagement within a broader strategy of targeting tribes and chiefs in terms of 'African tradition'.

Ethics: the postcolonial stopgap

Anthropological ethics have, in the postcolonial era, mostly been dealt with in terms of the use of ethical codes for anthropologists as judged by a committee of professional peers within a voluntary association. This seems, at first sight, a radical break with colonial legacies: the first complete code of ethics was adopted in 1971 by the American Anthropological Association in the context of the protest against the use of anthropology in imperialist US counterinsurgency programmes in particular, and the critique of neo-colonial and colonial anthropology in general. Elsewhere, however, I argued that the adoption of ethical codes for the anthropological profession must be seen against the historical background of previous moral engagements of anthropologists stemming from a colonial past (Pels 1999c). This plea for a deeper historical consciousness of the ethics of anthropology was vindicated, in my mind, when the scandal that erupted around the publication of Patrick Tierney's *Darkness in El Dorado* (2000) – accusing some anthropologists of exploiting the people they studied in the postcolonial era, and provoking the American Anthropological Association to heed some of the critiques of such colonial legacies – proved that some colonial spectres had by no means been exorcised in current anthropology (for a report, see Pels 2005). The difficulties of negotiating current anthropological identities in relation to a colonial history of ontological essentialism and a strategic illusion of objectivity are, perhaps, compounded in the contemporary effort to redefine the values of the profession and the discipline in terms of 'ethics'. Even more, professional ethics sometimes exude colonial paternalism rather than a clear understanding of everyday professional ethical practice.

Implicitly, the postcolonial ethics of anthropology have assumed much more than just a set of guidelines about what it is right or wrong to do as an anthropological professional: in the course of the colonial development of their craft, anthropologists have increasingly set a number of their moral responsibilities apart from those they would practise in the 'normal' discipline of their profession.¹² This happened in several phases.¹³ In the early nineteenth century, the founders of the Ethnological Society of London still felt that a correct knowledge of 'aborigines' would drive responsible governments in Australia, India and elsewhere to improve their lot. After the shock of the Indian Mutiny in 1857, an increasing number of practitioners (still predominantly 'amateur') stressed the capacity of anthropologists to negotiate more peaceful relationships between people administered by colonial officials and those officials themselves. It was only when, in the late colonial era (from the 1890s until World War 2), academic anthropologists started to argue that their university education could provide officials with information untainted by the political interests of colonial rule, that a 'value-free' anthropology slowly emerged. This 'value-free' (in other words, unethical) anthropology was based on one main principle: that anthropologists would deliver facts, for the colonial establishment to work upon with their values. For someone like Bronislaw Malinowski, this meant subordinating his preference for indirect rule in not-too-covert language (1929); for Edward Evans-Pritchard, explicating that 'applied' anthropology was secondary to 'pure' academic work (1946). Both

12 Ethical codes tend to isolate what is 'right to do' from the broader moral consideration of what it is 'good to be' (see Taylor 1989: 111) and thus to separate the values of anthropological ethics from the values of anthropological method.

13 The following paragraph summarises the historical findings in Pels (1999c).

declared the paramount relationship of anthropologists to be the *dyadic* one between themselves and their research subjects, in sharp contrast to their predecessors' *triadic* conception of the profession which negotiated between researcher, researched and the powers that be. The anthropologist's professional identity had in the early twentieth century been redefined as primarily responsible towards the people studied – the potential employers or (colonial) authorities of the expert had become external to that relationship.

This dyadic relationship diminishes anthropologists' ethical awareness: while the founders of the Ethnological Society were convinced that the gathering of knowledge about aborigines was morally compelling in itself, and the high imperial anthropologists felt their discipline gave them (ambivalent) responsibilities towards both the people studied and the (colonial) governments that administered them, in the dyadic relationship between researcher and researched, ethics has been reduced to the paramount responsibility towards the people studied.¹⁴ The dyadic relationship between researchers and researched was meant to allow the Malinowskian anthropologist to provide 'value-free' information about colonised peoples to colonial 'practical men', thus effectively extracting ethics out of the work of gathering reliable information (or 'method'), and denying that this work always already implies a relationship of inequality with both researched and the powers that be – or the others who provide the researchers with the conditions (funds, places, dwellings, audiences) by which research becomes possible. The main ethical worry of an anthropology conceived in this dyadic relationship is that, once the data are gathered, they are not passed on to anyone in ways that will harm the people studied. Thus, not only did dyadic anthropology reduce its ethical awareness, it continued to subscribe to the paternalistic attitude towards people studied that characterised earlier colonial anthropology. The people studied were not structurally part of the anthropologists' audience: their coevalness with the researcher continued to be denied (cf. Fabian 1983: 31).

While the American anthropologists of the 1960s rediscovered the triadic embedding of research when confronted with the governmental use of anthropological expertise in counterinsurgency warfare in Latin America and Southeast Asia against peasant uprisings in the 1960s, the anti-colonial atmosphere of the period led most of them to emphasise the dyadic relationship with the people researched – mostly to defend the integrity of the profession against possible accusations of clandestine or secret research (not least, by newly established Third World governments with the capacity to grant or withdraw research permits).¹⁵ The emergence of an ethical code in the American Anthropological Association – shortly to be imitated by a number of professional associations in Europe – should therefore be seen as a postcolonial stopgap, defending the profession against the colonial legacy of being immersed in the historical relationships between anthropological experts, (neo-)colonial governments, and the people studied, yet taking over the paternalism characteristic of those relationships. While critical anthropologists, in particular, pointed out some of these flaws, such critiques were seldom effective until recently (see Nencel and Pels 1991).

14 This is the gist of the first article of the American Anthropological Association's Principles of Professional Responsibility, adopted in 1971 and revised in the 1990s.

15 The British and American anthropologists' war effort, although relevant, is too complex to deal with in this short essay (but see Richards 1977; Yans-McLaughlin 1986).

When an anthropologically trained journalist, Patrick Tierney, denounced a number of famous anthropologists for having abused the trust of their research relationships with Yanomami in Venezuela in his *Darkness in El Dorado* in 2000, the warring factions initially divided along the lines of a fact/value distinction: a faction defending the objectivity of the research of the anthropologists accused and attacking the irresponsibilities of those who maintained a moral imperative; and a critical faction that saw in those accused the remnants of an immoral, positivist colonial discipline. (The majority seemed to suffer in silence.) A year and several task forces later, however, the leadership of the American Anthropological Association came up with a number of reports and actions that seemed to change the conception of the profession in a number of ways – and especially to provoke a shift from colonial conceptions of research to *collaboration* with the people studied (Watkins, quoted in EDTF 2003/1: 45; Lamphere 2003). This seems to do away with the colonial legacy of paternalism towards people studied; it may also close the gap between anthropological ethics and anthropological method. It may not address the problematic denial of the unequal power relationships in which anthropological research takes place, since it still seems to be based on the dyadic responsibility towards the people studied, denying that anthropologists very often work on the basis of being allowed to do so by a third party. In this case, the colonial legacy of ethics *within* the profession may still prevent us from realising what a study of the moral responsibilities of anthropologists in the colonial era can teach us.

What may be far more important, however, is that the focus on ethics shows us that the current image of the anthropologist as an expert delivering unambiguous, useful and reliable knowledge – more prevalent, I would argue, outside the academy than within it – is at odds with the ambivalent image of the anthropologist that the anthropology of colonialism teaches us. As I have argued elsewhere, anthropologists have always been wedged between the people studied on the one hand, and the powers that be on the other, to such an extent that the ‘duplexity’ that characterises this triadic relationship never allows them to show a ‘true face’ to either party-in-negotiation (Pels 1999c, 2000: 164). It is not good to exaggerate our differences from the earliest fieldworkers – such as Sir Richard Burton, who employed his previous experience as a spy in the service of the British Indian Army to travel in disguise to Mecca, in order to write a (for the time, very sympathetic) account of Islamic pilgrimage, only to find that critics in Britain dismissed his effort because a true British gentleman would never resort to such dishonest behaviour. This cultural and social ambivalence is not necessarily a problem: duplexity is not duplicity, and the trickster’s position is usually not one taken up in bad faith, but one adopted for the moral and epistemological advantages it delivers. It might, for example, be seen as equivalent to the position of a negotiator or diplomat (cf. Pels 1999c, 2000). But while there is nothing particularly objectionable to this ambivalent position as such, we do have a problem once we realise that the colonial legacies that expect anthropologists to be Malinowskian ‘value-free’ experts – even more, experts that may solve (for example) the state’s problems with minorities or with less developed parts of the population – are still around to define our relevance, and may prevent us from realising in a novel design of the profession what we have learned from the anthropology of colonialism about our ethical position.

Conclusion: We have never been universal¹⁶

I started this essay by asking whether the anthropology of colonialism has made a ‘real difference’ to our field – somewhat facetiously, since how can we ever reliably measure such influence? But the anthropology of colonialism both shared aspects of a certain moment of disciplinary renewal and contributed its own specific focus to it. With the literary turn in anthropology, it shared an emphasis on representations, but instead of trying to resolve the ‘crisis of representation’ by more and other representations, it turned to the work of representation as an historical object instead. With globalisation studies, it shared the interest in undoing the illusions of the exotic, remote and local, but it found a globalising world long before the deterritorialisation of the nation-state, often at the heart of the societies anthropology studied. With the rise of science and technology studies, it shared a preoccupation with the ethnography of the modern, but in an environment where the asymmetries between modern and traditional (or its equivalent dichotomies) were much more obvious than in our present. It was precisely because of this set of historical references, I maintain, that the anthropology of colonialism is so contemporaneous in scope, and invites us not only to defamiliarise our recent past, but also to see how these strange natives of modernity – for after all, modernity is undeniably, and alienatingly, a part-product of colonial relationships – are still the ancestors of our own present.

Yet all we can learn from the anthropology of colonialism we learn, as it were, under a cloud of suspicion – since a majority of anthropologists of colonialism took their cue from what was called ‘critical anthropology’ and a mistrust of colonial anthropology and ethnography. I maintain that, in this way, anthropologists of colonialism brought morality and care into the phenomena they studied, an attitude that, as I hope to have argued in the previous section, is based on the ethnographic imperative of the willingness to contrast, compare and bring into relation sometimes radically different sets of values. In this way, I think, the anthropology of colonialism has pushed us to recognise anthropology’s primary model of ethical engagement – one not based on the concept of a code, but on the methodological and theoretical practice of an open-ended ethics of negotiation. I would go so far as to say that this model, in its openness, is as universal, and perhaps even more universal, as the model of human rights as a universally shared set of static rules, because the latter usually still derive from specific liberal and secular cultures and because their negotiability is circumscribed by powerful international institutions dominated by the West. While I therefore think that anthropology has more right to the claim of carrying a universal research ethic than other social sciences or humanities (something it shares with many forms of area studies), and that the critical potential developed by the anthropology of colonialism has given us some of the tools to develop that universal claim further, I have also tried to show that the colonial legacies with which we are still confronted (both within and outside our professional public spheres) prevent us from realising this universal promise. (Anthropology’s claim to universality is the firmer because other social sciences rarely even *realise* that certain of their core epistemological and ontological foundations are inherited from colonial times.) Our increased consciousness of the historical embedding of the discipline makes us realise that it is this same historical embedding that often

16 This subtitle of course echoes Latour’s seminal booklet (1993) – with this big difference that, while I doubt we should ever want to become modern, I do aim for a contribution to universal knowledge.

prevents us from learning as much from the anthropology of colonialism as we might want. Like anthropology in general, the anthropology of colonialism was also driven by a humanistic ideal, and in particular the ideal that questioned the extent to which human differences could be regarded as natural (rather than historically constructed).

But if my diagnosis is correct that the realisations of this ideal are thwarted by ontologies of cultural authenticity, epistemologies of strategic distance and a conception of research that divorces ethics from method, we should be very wary of any optimism about anthropology's universality. However much I sympathise with João de Pina-Cabral's recent plea for a 'World Anthropology' – however much his plea is based on a serious engagement and negotiation of European, Latin American and Asian anthropologies and sociologies (de Pina-Cabral 2005) – the anthropology of colonialism reminds us of the fact that the inequalities between intellectual traditions are historically entrenched and reside in broader ontologies, epistemologies and research ethics, which no amount of dialogue (between anthropological traditions as much as between anthropologists and their interlocutors) has so far managed to define out of existence. However much I want to collaborate with the recently founded World Anthropologies Network – and its conception of anthropology in the plural is, I should emphasise, an important step forward (World Anthropologies Network 2003) – the anthropology of colonialism's history of the present shows how uneven the global playing field still is, if only because anthropology as a discipline has no exclusive position in defining this field as its own. However much we may 'provincialise' the hyperreality of the West, it remains intellectually – not to mention in practical terms – a dominant term of reference for scholars as much as for the people they study (Chakrabarty 2000).

Nevertheless, this in itself shows that the anthropology of colonialism, while dealing often with the past, more importantly carried forward a set of ideals in and from our present that is necessary to reinvent some of our more or less universal principles of understanding. Thus, it holds out the promise of contributing to changing the 'actual state of affairs' of 'native society' on the basis of understanding 'the play of the Ideal and its actualization' within 'native doctrine' (Malinowski 1972: 119). Thus, anthropologists in general, and anthropologists of colonialism in particular, can hope to recycle colonial anthropology's principles of understanding in ways that may contribute to the realisation of that universal ideal some time in the future – on the democratic basis of what I regard as the main ontological, epistemological and ethical principle promoted by the anthropology of colonialism: that the 'natives' include us.

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