

Anthropology and the Challenge of Cognitivism

The Epistemology of a Divided Discipline

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What is anthropology, and what type of knowledge does it produce? Gérard Lenclud applies his background in epistemology and questions the future of anthropology in relation to other disciplines as a means of highlighting both the similar challenges they face and the different methodologies they employ.

Reviewed: Gérard Lenclud, *L'universalisme ou le pari de la raison: anthropologie, histoire, psychologie*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2013.

Although the author won't admit it, it is particularly clear from the seven chapters which make up *L'Universalisme ou le pari de la raison* that it is a text about the epistemology of anthropology. Lenclud handles his subject matter in a decidedly detached manner; he is able to share his practical knowledge without the slightest hint that his personal background as ethnologist and ethnographer should afford him a privileged position in the debate, a stance consistent with his very open, interdisciplinary approach to the subject. He avoids the initial narrowness which sometimes plagues anthropology and explains that it is only by placing himself in the knowledge space, through exposure to other disciplines whose modes of knowledge are similar to his own, that he is able to find his bearings and better define his own ideas. If it were merely a question of comparing the human sciences, there would be nothing very original in such an approach; indeed, questioning the associations between anthropology and sociology or history is now common practice. However, Lenclud's starting point is to question anthropology's widely accepted classification among the *social* sciences, for while he does not entirely reject its inclusion, he emphasises the fact that, faced with certain developments in the cognitive sciences, it can no longer be treated as a self-evident truth but should instead be understood as a choice.

What the text effectively seeks to address is the challenge of developing an epistemology for an anthropology which is deeply divided. This division is reflected in language. Anthropology can no longer be described as a single discipline; the emergence of *cognitive* anthropology now requires that we describe its counterpart as *classical* anthropology. Attempts to identify the specific mode of knowledge for a discipline which has been split in such a manner inevitably brings to mind Passeron's *Le Raisonnement sociologique (Sociological Reasoning: A Non-Popperian Space of Argumentation)*, a recurring reference in Lenclud's text. It is important, however, to explain why the terms of the problem as they are outlined in each of these texts may not be comparable. Firstly, while statistics in sociology introduce an empirical quality to the discipline and are used to reveal patterns inherent in social facts, cognitive and evolutionary psychology reveal innate, infra-social determinism indicative of cultural and mental conditioning. Secondly, the structuring of the two systems of knowledge for anthropology, historical on the one hand, cognitive on the other, seems a lot more insecure than that applied in Passeron's argument regarding sociology, for while all quantitative versions of sociology must reconcile the demands of contextualisation with attempts to interpret statistics, the two anthropologies appear, with a few rare exceptions (Lenclud cites the work of Maurice Bloch in particular), to function perfectly well without each other. While Lenclud considers this gulf between the two anthropologies to be unfortunate, he suggests there is nothing accidental about it, and that it cannot be explained solely through potential tensions in disciplinary identity which might arise from either side. Let us examine why this is the case.

The unity of the historical sciences

The first two chapters are primarily concerned with positioning 'classical' anthropology within the historical rather than the social sciences. This is a crucial distinction, for the author attributes the former's unity to their inclusive and narrative mode of knowledge rather than to Durkheim's obedience theory on the irreducible nature of reality in individual psychology. In the opening chapter's fictitious dialogue, it is the historian and not the sociologist who acts as the anthropologist's interlocuter. At the heart of Lenclud's argument is a rejection of the premise that ethnographic observations offer immediate access to and understanding of reality; observing facts with one's own eyes does not ever mean that one is able entirely to escape the influence of the various processes of choice, analysis, fact-checking and cross-referencing, contextualisation and narration which each contribute in equal measure to the writing of history. The aporetic outcome of the arguments and counter-arguments

exchanged in the dialogue does not, however, erase all differences between the work of ethnologists and historians. The issue at stake is rather to dispute that these differences are inherent, although Lenclud seems reluctant to attribute them entirely to disciplinary specificity or to a divide more difficult to bridge, between archives and fieldwork.

The second chapter challenges this theory of the accuracy of eye-witness observations by showing the considerable differences which exist in travel writing and early ethnographic accounts and how they were influenced by the perception schemes of established theories prevalent at the time. It is this fact, well established by contemporary historians of anthropology, which leads Lenclud to apply the theory of historical accuracy of the standards of acceptability for ethnographic data to contemporary anthropology. The criteria used today to determine the validity of travel accounts are themselves subject to our own conceptions of man and culture and as such, remain open to correction.

Folk psychology and cognitive psychology

The three chapters which follow focus on positioning psychology at the heart of anthropology, which is a crucial point, since this could represent a possible unifying factor between the two contemporary anthropologies. Lenclud seeks to illustrate how the interpretative nature of historical explanation inevitably draws from human psychology and mental states since, in order to explain history, it must reveal the motivations and reasoning behind human behaviour. Lenclud is certainly not naive enough to believe that psychology will possess the same meaning here as it does in the cognitive sciences, but his approach is to apply to the historical sciences the version of psychology least incompatible with cognitive psychology. It must be remembered that debate in the social sciences focuses far less on the influence of mental phenomena than it does on the way in which these phenomena are interpreted; dismissal of the role of psychology has, since Durkheim and throughout the history of sociology, anthropology, as well as history, always centred around distinguishing between the individual psyche and its mechanisms and the human mind objectified in institutions and systems of collective representation. The choice to root the historical sciences in an individualistic 'folk psychology' obviously enables Lenclud to create an attachment with cognitivism (in which the former should, at the very least, not contradict the results of the latter). This association between the historical sciences and cognitivism, however, must necessarily result in a rejection of the strong social sciences programme with which Levi

Strauss, who is mentioned several times in the text, associated himself during his work in *La Pensee Sauvage* on the role of psychology in anthropology.

Those who believe that the various versions of this programme have failed (a question which cannot be dealt with here) are in little doubt that this is a sacrifice which should be made. However, Lenclud's very cautious approach is indicative of how little the cognitivist programme has to offer those who might hope to use it to benefit and inform their work in historical explanation; even the best experimentally established psychological mechanisms (which, as the author quite rightly points out, should not be confused with nomological explanations) would be incapable of attributing a causal or predictive force to explain historical events, since ultimately it is the existence of opposing mechanisms which explains everything in life. In terms of psychological generalisations, La Rochefoucauld and Tocqueville have been found to be more useful than the developmental psychologists. This distancing from cognitive determinism, which marks the limits to a reconciliation between the two branches of anthropology, is widened further still with the very reasonable suggestion in Chapter 5 that the definition of culture be narrowed to focus on the reflexive aspect of human activity.

Refuting relativism

The text concludes with a detailed two-stage discussion of the problem of relativism. The sixth chapter proposes that the philosophical debate relating to the principle of charity (which poses the question of whether we should automatically assume that other cultures' discourse is rational and attribute any obvious nonsense to mistakes in translation) be introduced within the field of anthropology, in order to create a version more respectful of cultural differences. To do so would involve a shift from charity towards parity. Contrary to the theories of evolutionism and primitive mentality which completely dismiss all beliefs different from our own, the fundamental achievement of the anthropology developed by Malinowski and Boas can be seen in the way it seeks to 'rethink the beliefs of others', in other words, to increase their legitimacy by taking into account the context in which they were formed. The purpose of anthropology, however, is not so much to excuse and justify others' potential errors of judgement as it is to treat their belief systems as being equal to our own, which, for the author, means first and foremost relativising and putting the range of beliefs which catch our attention because they are different to our own into perspective, so that they may then be reinterpreted through the infinite prism of our collective tacit beliefs.

The eponymous long final essay takes this initial conclusion further by rejecting extreme relativism, which supports the theory that cultures have nothing in common and cannot be compared amongst each other. The author maintains that this type of relativism disproves itself, since in order to be able to assert that any culture is incommensurable with our own, we must first have gained access to a mental universe which, it argues, is inaccessible. It is unfortunate, however, that in choosing to focus his criticism on such an extreme version of relativism, Lenclud distances the debate from the real issues anthropologists face; aside from Whorf, whose work is invariably cited in this type of discussion, there is no anthropologist who subscribes to such relativist views, and even the historians of science deemed to do so (Thomas Kuhn is the first to spring to mind) ultimately do not correspond to such a profile. Lenclud is thus forced to develop his argument in the style of analytical philosophy, creating invented ontologies from scratch, an exercise less innocuous than it sounds, for it challenges the definition of animistic ontology put forward by Philippe Descola in *Par-delà nature et culture*. Lenclud believes that the potential for metamorphosis recognised in animism (of which Descola emphasised both the rarity and the regularity) would have the effect of destroying not only all specific identity but, ultimately, all forms of identity altogether. This argument, which seems to me not entirely convincing, limits animism to the confines of scholarly ontology (comparable, for example, to that of quantum physics), beneath which a universalism, perhaps more substantial than the title of Lenclud's essay would suggest, postulates a consistent everyday ontology which the naive theories of cognitive psychology bring to life.

While we should not underestimate the ability of a community of researchers to blind themselves to what is going on outside of their own domain of knowledge (even in the absence of any real paradigm), it is unlikely that the historical sciences would remain entirely unresponsive to developments in the cognitive sciences. The issue Lenclud seeks to address in his text, that of defining a mode of coexistence between the two, is therefore certainly an important one worthy of attention. The author's suggested approach, akin to one realm acknowledging a distant other whilst insisting upon its own right to inviolable autonomy, has the advantage of maintaining peace at all costs (little is expected of the first realm, other than to occasionally receive cognitive psychologists as guests with the honours due their rank.) At a time when Chomskyan linguistics is in decline, however, one wonders if the social sciences, instead of associating with proponents of this nativist and extremely modular programme,

won't instead build closer, and perhaps less secure, ties with programmes which seek to determine how the mind manages to derive ideas which are both universal and inherently variable from the information it is exposed to.

Books&ideas.net, August 31st, 2015.

Published in laviedesidees.fr, 9th September 2013. Translated by Victoria Lazar Graham with the support of the Institut Français.

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