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THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF RITUALS

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Since theoretical refinement in the social sciences is not linear but spiraled, appropriations from the past are frequently used as heuristic means for present analysis. This fact does not derive from intellectual nostalgia, or from a fascination with previous theories, nor from the idealization of their explicative power but rather because, revisited, these theories reveal unexpected aspects in their re-combination that, then as now, make them contemporary products. Sociological theories have links with the empirical reality in which they are generated but they are not determined by it; the relative autonomy of sociological theories make them at the same time ephemeral and continuous.

My proposal in this essay is that the study of rituals, a classic topic of anthropology since Durkheim, takes on a special theoretical meaning and, less obviously, a political one, when transplanted from past studies to the modern world. In this transposition, the focus previously directed to a type of phenomenon considered non-routine and specific, usually of a religious character, is enlarged and expanded in order to privilege *events* that, while still acknowledging their socially given attributes as special phenomena, depart from the classic ritual studies due to their purposive and probabilistic aspects. I will return to this point later. Now, it is sufficient to mention that in the analysis of events, the basic instruments of the analysis of rituals are maintained but their implications are reoriented and expanded.

Five sections make up this essay: the first discusses the topic of magic and science as propelling anthropological theory at the beginning of the century; the second section refers to the contrast between myths and rites (and the positive and negative aspects of this dichotomy); the third deals with the topic of social efficacy and focuses on the performative approach to the analysis of rituals; the fourth links rituals and events by means of the relationship between culture and language; and the fifth examines in detail Stanley Tambiah's book *Leveling Crowds*, published in 1996. An

epilogue divided in two short sections focuses on the relationship between events, chances and coincidences, and the choice between writing stories or analysing events in the context of (the politics of) contemporary theory.

I
Magic and science

After a half century, it is easy to recognize the revolution that the ideas of Lévi-Strauss represented for anthropology. Since the 1900s, anthropologists had been afflicted with the distinction between magic, science and religion — whether to put these phenomena in evolutionary sequence, or to characterize them as more, or less, primitive and civilized, or even to demonstrate their rationality in context. By the Fifties they had achieved a high level of sophistication in their considerations of these topics. But in the sequence that goes from Tylor and Frazer to Durkheim, Mauss and Lévy-Bruhl, or from Tylor and Frazer to Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss occupies an important place for having made a fundamental step in that long process through which, in anthropology, the meeting of the coordinates of time (evolutionary or historical) and space (ethnographic) was conclusively resolved through the premise that all peoples — primitives and civilized, with or without writing, with greater or lesser technologies — are not only rational in context and psychically unified, but think in the same manner and have all our own magic, science and religion.

In this context, two works by Lévi-Strauss, both published at the beginning of the Sixties, are interestingly complementary. One became a landmark of anthropology; the other, a simple article published in a more popular journal. I am referring to *The Savage Mind* and the article "The modern crisis of anthropology."[1] In spite of the diverse audiences, and the varied objectives of these two works — visible in the style of argumentation —, the texts are parallel regarding Lévi-Strauss' encirclement of (ir)-rationality.

[1] This article, published in *Le Courrier* of UNESCO, received little attention and it is difficult to find even in the best libraries. See Lévi-Strauss (1961, 1962). In Brazil, "The Crisis..." became an oft-cited text in undergraduate courses. I believe this was due to its translation into Portuguese the year after its original publication.

In *The Savage Mind* an optimistic (theoretical) argument is evident. Following his book *Totemisme Aujourd'hui*, the solution to the difference between magic, science and religion was made explicit: magic, art and science are parallel forms of knowledge; if the primitives have magic, they also function scientifically, and we, moderns, in addition to having science, also have magic and totemism. Though it is possible to criticize Lévi-Strauss's conception of science as obsolete,[2] the revolution foreseen by Durkheim and Mauss was a fact: primitives and moderns were side by side. It is true that magic still maintained an inflection as the "shadow that precedes science,"[3] and that different types of classification (taxonomic and metaphoric) were respectively subjacent to science and magic. Rites were contrasted with games by the foreseeable result of the latter: in rites, the asymmetry between profane and sacred produced a union, in games, the structure created events; rites were linked to *bricolage*, games, to science. But amongst the ideas introduced by Lévi-Strauss, it was the notion of *bricolage* which represented the greatest novelty and caused an impact that made it difficult to ground any objection to his proposal. The basic ideas defended in *The Savage Mind* became, since then, self-evident and were thus incorporated in the common sense baggage of anthropology.

This is a repeated process in the history of the discipline. We live with the constant incorporation of one's predecessors, despite the feelings of rupture and innovation. Thus, Mauss criticized Frazer for his intellectualism — and incorporated his ideas as part of his sociological analysis; Evans-Pritchard demolished Malinowski and his exclusively ethnographic propensity — and assimilated the latter's ideas in his structural analyses. Lévi-Strauss criticized both Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown — and while the first was erroneously interpreted as basically concerned with the cries of the primitives' stomachs, the second was incorporated by the fundamental question: "Why these birds?" Lévi-Strauss's destiny would not be different. Initially his ideas produced an explosion in several directions: from putting together primitive cosmologies and sophisticated debates of Western philosophy, to the demonstration that everything that was detected in the primitive world had its modern correspondent, from food taboos to capitalist systems of clothes and fashion. More recently,

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[2] For Lévi-Strauss, science is basically the capacity for classification. See the paragraphs of the first chapter, in which the author reviews the literature of (the then recent) ethnoscience. For a criticism of anthropology as science, see Latour 1996.

[3] See Tambiah 1968, for a critical appreciation of Lévi-Strauss' hesitations regarding magic and science when confronted with the works of Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard.

anthropological studies about science are in debt to his intellectual lineage.[4]

Published at the same time, "The modern crisis of anthropology" has a different rhetorical strategy: addressed to a wide public, the enunciation of the problem seems at first to be pessimistic. Focusing on the possible end of anthropology and using the term crisis in the very title, the picture seems conspiratory: on one hand, primitive peoples are diminishing in number; on the other, the recently independent states are showing intolerance to ethnographic research. If in the *The Savage Mind* the bi-directional nature of research, based on the sameness of the human mind, is theoretically defended, here it is denied in a pragmatic sense: what for anthropologists is a desirable diversity, for the natives is an unbearable inequality. At this moment Lévi-Strauss makes one of his well-known rhetorical twists in order to affirm that anthropology was never defined by an object in absolute terms: it has always been developed as a certain relationship between an observer and a subject. Thus, if it is inevitable that the world becomes westernized and turn into a big Creole village, this same world will continue to harbor the differential traits that anthropologists looked for before in distant cultures. The result of this argument is multiple: first, there is no doubt about the future of anthropology since its object is not a type of society but the always-present cultural differences. Second, anthropology at every phase has helped to enlarge the currently held and always too comstricting view of humanity. Finally, current and future crises are eliminated: "As long as the ways of thinking or of acting of some men perplex other men, there will be scope for meditation on these differences; and this, in a constantly renewing form, will be the abiding province of anthropology" (1961: 17).

Today these two texts can be seen as representing, respectively, a theoretical renovation and a pragmatic optimism within the discipline.[5] But, after so many years, we may better appreciate the complementarity of them, including the epistemological implications of "The crisis": Lévi-Strauss rejected in this article the (im)possibility of a supposedly planetary homogenization, just as he made explicit why anthropology would not be affected by the consequences of the westernization of the modern world. Anthropology was ready, as always, to face changes.

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[4] But see Rabinow (1996) for the mechanisms of *bricolage* in contemporary science.

[5] It is worth remembering that Lévi-Strauss wrote many texts for UNESCO. Some of them, such as "Race and History," became landmarks of the discipline and were included in the collected volumes organized by the author. But "The modern crisis of anthropology" did not receive much attention, not even from the author. See Benthallk 1984, for the relationship between Lévi-Strauss and UNESCO.

These are questions still debated today. For many, "the new indeterminate emergent worlds with which we all now live" (Fischer 1999: 457) produce theoretical, if not practical, challenges, but anthropology will still be "the most useful of checks on theorizing becoming parochial, ethnocentric, generally uncomparative, uncosmopolitan, and sociologically ungrounded" (:457). This sense of optimism was already present in Lévi-Strauss' texts of the Sixties regarding both the horizontality of human practices, and the anthropological task of revealing the mechanisms of a world with new facets and renewed margins.

II
Myths and rites

At the moment that the horizontality between magic, science and religion was established, the dichotomy between primitives and moderns was eliminated. But, in the spiraling of history, other dichotomies arose, or became more evident and, in a certain sense, perverse. I call attention to the intellectual process that led Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists to question totemism as an institution and, in its place, establish it as a sort of mechanism which was "good to think." This contrasted with that seen simply as "good to eat" — a pragmatic concern attributed to Malinowski as the basis of his sociological theory. If, then, on one hand a path was opened to deconstruct a series of categories (such as totemism, magic and religion), and, in the process, eventually others such as economy, kinship and politics, on the other hand something important did not allow a creative return to the total social fact. Lévi-Strauss commented retrospectively in 1975:

> "La génération à laquelle j'appartiens fut essentiellement préoccupée d'introduire un peu plus de rigueur dans notres disciplines; elle s'est donc efforcée, chaque foi qu'elle étudiait des phénomèmes, de limiter le nombre des variables qu'il fallait considérer. ... Car évidemment, nous les savious, que l'économie, la parenté, la religion étaient liées; nous le savons depuis Mauss, qui nous l'a enseignée et l'a proclamé avec Malinowski" (Lévi-Strauss 1975: 184-5; my emphasis).

This lucidity about the relationship that linked economy, kinship, religion, etc. did not prevent Lévi-Strauss from maintaining and defending the dichotomy myths vs. rituals. Demanding a separate study of both, he made of myths the privileged access to the

human mind. Rites were relegated to the enactment of gestures and the manipulation of objects, while the very exegesis of rituals became a part of mythology:

> "On dira que [le rituel] consiste en paroles proférées, gestes accomplis, objets manipulés indépendamment de toute glose ou exégèse permise ou appelée par ces trois genres d'activité et qui relévent, non pas du ritual même, mais de la mythologie implicite" (Lévi-Strauss 1971: 600).

Myths and rituals would mark an inherent antinomy in the human condition between two unavoidable subjections: that of living and that of thinking. Rites were part of the first; myths, of the second. Rites had an implicit mythology that was manifested in the exegeses, but in its pure state they would loose their affinity with language (*langue*). Myth, thus, would be comprehensive, total thinking, superior to the rite that was merely related to practice. The paradoxical result of this disjunction was that, under new clothing, the old dichotomy between social relationships and representations re-emerged. Although Durkheim had insisted on the necessity of including *acts of society* in the study of society, having emphasized that it is by means of common action that society becomes conscious of itself — a necessity periodically affirmed and recreated —, and although Mauss had seen magic as a privileged individual kind of a collective phenomenon but efficient in its *sui generis* form, for many decades the historical appropriation of these authors — even by Lévi-Strauss himself — heuristically separated the two levels: myths were associated with representations, rituals with empirical social relations.

Curiously, even the contemporaneous contenders of Lévi-Strauss contributed to the analogy myths = representations. Victor Turner, for instance, tried to recover the *living* dimension, defining rituals as privileged loci for observing the structural principles among the Ndembu of Africa, but also as being suited for detecting the processual dimension of rupture, crisis, separation and reintegration, the study of which he had started successfully through the idea of "social drama" — rituals would be as if fixed and routinized social dramas, and its symbols, within a Durkheimian perspective, apt for refined micro-sociological analysis. In 1975, Turner, fascinated by processes, conflicts and dramas — in short, by the lived — stated, within the context of his polemic with structuralism: "On earth the broken arcs, in heaven the perfect round" (1975: 145), observing that no symbolic systems of a concrete society are realized to perfection.[6]

[6] It is important to mention that Turner kept the definition of ritual linked to the belief

Within the context of the Sixties, Edmund Leach also contributed to this topic with a small essay that became a classic. Previously, Leach had tried to lessen the distinction between myth and ritual when he conceived the Kachin as engaged in sorts of behavior that were more or less technical, and more or less ritual (Leach 1954). In the article of 1966, Leach distinguished three kinds of behavior: in addition to rational-technical (directed towards specific ends that, when judged by our standards of verification, produces results in a mechanical way), there is the communicative type (part of a system that transmits information through cultural codes) and the magical type (that is efficient in terms of cultural conventions). For Leach the last two types were considered rituals. Thus, on one hand, Leach made a great breakthrough by *not* distinguishing verbal behaviors from non-verbal ones. As a consequence, Leach closed the gap between ritual and myth. This was a major innovation: ritual was a complex of words and actions and the enunciation of words was already a ritual. Ritual became condensed language, therefore economical; and the primitive became an ingenious and creative man. However, by remaining faithful to the structuralist approach, Leach moved ritual too close to myth, in excess, thereby allowing it to loose what was specific to it: since the main object of ritual was to transmit and perpetuate knowledge both ritual and myth were equally inserted within the order of the human mind. The "good to live" dimension had been narrowed, almost disappeared.

It is not necessary to recall that it was Victor Turner, and not Leach, who received social recognition as the specialist in the study of ritual. Nevertheless, both hesitated in a central point where Evans-Pritchard (1929) had not: formal traits, whether of myths or of rites, are also cultural products and part of distinct cosmologies. Comparing the Azande and the Trobrianders, Evans-Pritchard used them as icons of Africa and of Melanesia, and associated them respectively with rituals and verbal enchantments. Today we may reexamine that approach, but during the Sixties anthropologists were still concerned with maintaining what they had won in the post-Malinowski period, that is to say, "a little more rigor in the discipline," as recognized by Lévi-Strauss in 1975. For this purpose, it was necessary to limit the number of variables under consideration, which resulted, for example, both in the rejection of an ethnographic experiment as *Naven* (Bateson 1936), and in the affirmation of the irreducible specificity of each system such as kinship, economy, politics and religion. The *relationship between these systems*, taught and proclaimed by Mauss and Malinowski, remained in the background, as did the relationship between ethnography and

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in mystical beings or powers (Turner 1967). For a reanalysis of Ndembu trees as studied by Victor Tuner, see Peirano 1995.

anthropological theory. Every step includes advances and retreats. This was part of a price that anthropology had to pay for the advances of structuralism.

III
Efficacy

To distinguish between social relationships and representations is a heuristic resource in anthropological analysis. But societies do not reproduce themselves simply because people interact and because they think about the world; the movement and dynamism of societies derive from the efficacy of active social powers — to use the master idea of Durkheim. In others words, society is not a nominal and rational entity, but a system of interacting forces. Along with action, the efficacy of ideas and beliefs needs to be included in the analysis, in order for the mechanisms of the reproduction of society be identified.

The fundamental role of the notion of efficacy was recognized when Mauss proposed, in the theory of magic, that a sui generis power linked together the magician, the rituals and the representations (Mauss 1972). For Mauss, acts and representations are not only inseparable, it is also indispensable the inclusion of notions of belief ("magic is believed and not perceived," p. 97), force and magical powers ("magical rites can be explained much less clearly through the application of abstract laws than through the transfer of properties whose actions and reactions are known beforehand," p. 75; or "here we have a transfer — rather than an association — of ideas," p. 67), all of them imbued in *mana* ("power, par excellence, the genuine effectiveness of things," p. 111). Mana, this unconscious category of understanding, unites quality, substance and activity ("mana is not simply a force, a being, it is also an action, a quality, a state," p. 108). Although it rarely reaches the state of consciousness, it is inherent to magic as social phenomenon:

> "We feel justified in concluding that a concept, encompassing the idea of magical power, was once found everywhere. It involves the notion of automatic efficacy. At the same time as being a material substance which can be localized, it is also spiritual. It works at a distance and also through a direct connexion, if not impersonal and at the same time clothed in personal forms. It is divisible yet whole. Our own ideas about luck and quintessence are but weak survivals of this much richer concept" (1972: 117)

Mauss continues:

> "In order to explain more clarly *how the world of magic is superimposed on the other world without detaching itself from it*, we might go further and add that everything happens as if it were part of a fourth spatial dimension. An idea like *mana* expresses, in a way, this occult existence" (:117, my emphasis).

And he concludes:

> "The function ... of an unconscious category of understanding is truly brought about by the facts. We have already pointed out that it was uncommon for it to become part of a people's consciousness and even more uncommon for it to find any expression. The fact is that it is inherent in magic in the same way that Euclid's propositions are inherent in our concepts of space" (1972: 118).

Though established by Mauss at the beginning of the century, the notion of efficacy did not gain many adepts in the following decades. During the Fifties, this notion was revived by Lévi-Strauss — with only a tangential reference to its origin — in two essays that became well-known, but were discontinued in his work as a whole. Structuralism was more concerned with classification itself than with the movement and dynamic of society, including transferences, values and powers.[7] It is as if only after the exhaustion of structuralism as a project directed to the human mind that ethnography could return as dominant in the discipline. This was already during the Seventies and Eighties. In this context, rituals were now recovered, not only as *good to think* but also as social action *good to live*. The Durkhemian proposition that perceived society as the source of collective representations which were efficacious in cults and rituals made a timely return:

> "The cult is not simply a system of signs by which the faith is outwardly translated; it is a collection of the means by which this is created and recreated periodically. Whether it consists in material acts or mental operations, it is always this which is efficacious" (Durkheim 1965: 464).

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[7] These texts are reproduced in Lévi-Strauss (1970). Their topics are the efficacy of symbols and the shaman's magic.

It is within this context that we may place the theoretical essays on ritual by Stanley Tambiah. Influenced directly by Edmund Leach (see Tambiah 1996a), and by his encouragement transformed into a fully anthropologist, Tambiah received as a legacy the challenge that Leach hinted but accomplished only partially, i.e., the experiment of combining the structuralist notions proposed by Lévi-Strauss with the ethnographical ideals of Malinowski. But Tambiah added to this difficult task the Maussian enigma of the efficacy.[8]

The path was traveled in stages: in 1969, Tambiah stated that "cultures and social systems are, after all, not only thought but also lived" (1969: 459) in the context of a dialogue with Leach's (1964) article about verbal abuse. Between the intellectualism of Lévi-Strauss ("natural species are chosen not because they are good to eat but because they are good to think") and the moralism of Meyer Fortes ("animals are good to prohibit because the are good to eat"), Tambiah defended a space for the reconciliation between the structural properties of symbolic systems *qua systems* and the efficacy of symbols in uniting individuals and groups to moral rules of behavior (1969: 458).

During the next ten years the project of linking symbolism and sociological efficacy was developed in articles which used as strategy the reanalysis of classic monographs. They not only revealed new aspects of these works, demonstrated the richness of good ethnography, but indicated that when a previous analysis is refined with new theoretical tools, a tribute is made to the original author. Let us follow the sequence: in 1968, based on Trobriand material, Tambiah published an essay in which he pointed out how the language of magic was *not* qualitatively different from everyday language. Rather, it was an intensified and dramatized form of it. The same laws of association that are applied to normal language are present in magic — as metaphor and metonymy, for example — except that in magic the objective is to transfer a quality to the recipient, either through the properties of language or by means of substances and ritual objects.

The transfer of properties continues to be the object of reflection in Tambiah (1973), when the reanalysis of Azande magic leads the author to experiment with the ideas of Austin (1962) about the performative act and illocutionary force, both for

[8] See Tambiah (1996a, 1998) for the links that connect Tambiah to Leach; Leach (1967) for an appraisal of the sociological work by Tambiah.

positive and negative magical analogies. There, Tambiah showed he had broken with Saussure's distinction between *langue/parole*, and emphasized how magical acts have referential meanings and at the same time act in a performative way. In an article of 1977, Tambiah introduced the notion of cosmology in order to contextualize cures by meditation in Buddhist rites in Thailand. And in 1979, having refined his analytical tools Tambiah produced a synthesis text about the performative approach to ritual (Tambiah 1979).[9]

This article became a reference for the study of ritual. Let us consider some fundamental aspects: in a different path from his predecessors, Tambiah began by considering unnecessary to define ritual in absolute terms. To the natives was delegated the possible distinction between rituals and non-rituals, to the ethnographer, the sensibility of detecting whatever distinction there was. For Tambiah, events that anthropologists define as rituals seem to share some traits — an order that structures them, a sense of collective realization with a defined purpose and a perception that they are different from routine events. But ritual is part of a cosmology:

> "Thus, while we must grant the importance of cultural presuppositions, of cosmological constructs, as anterior and antecedent context to ritual, we must also hold that our understanding of the communicative aspects of ritual may not be furthered by imagining that such a belief context adequately explains the form of ritual per se. But the clue for synthesizing this seeming antinomy has already been revealed in the fact that cosmological constructs are embedded (of course not exclusively) in rites, and that rites in turn enact and incarnate cosmological conceptions " (Tambiah 1985: 130).

Indeed, the performative character of ritual is implicated in the relationship between form and content that, at one and the same time, is contained in cosmology. For Tambiah, the inevitability of the cosmological perspective was graphically expressed by Wittgenstein in the aphorism: "If the flea were to construct a rite, it would be about the dog" (1985: 129). For cosmology, then,

> "I mean the body of conceptions that enumerate and classify the phenomena that compose the universe as an ordered whole and the norms and processes that govern it. From my point of view, a society's principal cosmological

[9] The above mentioned essays are included in Tambiah (1985), a collection of articles on the symbolic analysis of ritual and cosmology in terms of thought and action.

> notions are all those orienting principles and conceptions that are held to be sacrosanct, are constantly used as yardsticks, and are considered worthy of perpetuation relatively unchanged" (: 130).

And he adds:

> "As such, depending on the conceptions of the society in question, its legal codes, its political conventions, and its social class relations may be as integral to its cosmology as its 'religious' beliefs concerning gods and supernaturals. In other words, in a discussion of enactments which are quintessentially rituals in a 'focal' sense, the traditional distinction between religious and secular is of little relevance, and the idea of sacredness need not attach to religious things defined only in the Tylorian sense" (:130).

Therefore:

> "Anything toward which an 'unquestioned' and 'traditionalizing' attitude is adopted can be viewed as sacred. Rituals that are built around the sacrosanct character of constitutions and legal charters or wars of independence and liberation, and that are devoted to their preservation as enshrined truths or to their invocation as great events, have a 'traditionalizing role,' and in this sense may share similar constitutive features with rituals devoted to gods and ancestors" (: 130).

By avoiding a strict and fixed definition of ritual, the relationship between rites and other events also becomes flexible, in a plasticity generated by the ethnographic situation. That is to say, only a specific cosmology can explain why, in a certain context, myths, rites, taboos and/or prohibitions have the capacity of saying and doing different things, since semantically they are both separated and related: if one society privileges rites, another can emphasize myths (cf. for example, Evans-Pritchard 1929).

As culturally constructed systems of symbolic communication, rites are no longer only actions that correspond to (or derive from) a system of ideas, but they become good to think *and* good to act — as well as efficacious. Tambiah proposes that efficacy derives from the *performative* character of the rite in three senses: in the Austinian sense of performative, wherein saying something is also doing something as a conventional act; in the quite different sense of a staged performance that uses

multiple media by which the participants experience the event intensively; and in the sense of indexical values (cf. Peirce) being attached to and inferred by actors during the performance (1985: 128). In other words, rituals share some formal and patterned traits, but these are variable and based on specific ideological constructs. Thus conceived, the link between form and content becomes essential to efficacy, as well as cultural considerations are integrated and implied in the form that the ritual assumes.[10]

From this perspective, ritual consists of a procedure made on an object-symbol with the aim of an imperative transfer of its properties to the recipient. In this way, the ritual can not be considered false or mistaken in a causal sense but rather inappropriate, inadequate or imperfect. In the same way, the semantics of ritual action can not be judged in terms of the dichotomy true/false, but by the objectives of "persuasion," "conceptualization" and "expansion of meaning," just as the criteria of adequacy must be related to "validity," "legitimacy" and "felicity" of the performed rite (1985: 77-84).[11]

In short, by considering rites ethnographically, Tambiah reintegrates the centennial concern of anthropologists with the intrinsic features of ritual, by dissolving it.[12] He therefore follows the consecrated trajectory of the human sciences in the XX century: to focus on what common sense considers different, strange and anomalous so as to dissolve its weirdness and then reinsert it into the flow of the normal. That is what happened with aphasia, when Roman Jakobson proved that it could help us to understand linguistic and mental mechanisms that are present in any verbal communication; with dreams, when Sigmund Freud demonstrated that they were *good*

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[10] The definition of ritual is established as: "Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in the multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionally), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition). Ritual action in its constitutive features is performative in these three senses: in the Austinian sense of performative, wherein saying something is also doing something as a conventional act; in the quite different sense of staged performance that uses multiple media by which the participants experience the event intensively; and in the sense of indexical values — I derive this concept from Peirce — being, attached to and inferred by actors during the performance" (Tambiah 1985:128).

[11] A recent essay by Tambiah focuses upon multiple (cosmological) orientations (Tambiah 1996b).

[12] For a slightly different interpretation of Tambiah's approach, see Kelly and Kaplan (1990), who basically include it in the Weberian tradition.

to analyze, pointing to the mechanisms of the conscious and the unconscious; with totemism, when Lévi-Strauss detected in these phenomena analogical mechanisms between culture and nature that are generally present in symbolism. In the case of rituals, to focus on their specificity in order to show that they are moments of intensification of what is common make them privileged loci — true icons or diagrams — used to detect common traits of other moments and social situations. If there is a coherence to social life — as we anthropologists believe —, what is observed in the fragment of the ritual (whether resolution of conflicts, according to Turner; transmission of knowledge, as Leach would have it; or the link between social action and cosmology, following Tambiah) also reveals other areas of behavior that the ethnographer studies. We live complex, interconnected, successive and interelated ritual systems that update cosmologies while being oriented by them.

IV
Rites and events

The century that put a prize on science as its maximum achievement also gave central importance to the referential function of language. In the past hundred years, Western common sense conceived of language as parallel and correspondent to mental process. This view of verbal communication informed and dominated even traditional linguistics. In the course of the century, however, confronted with non-Western peoples, this emphasis on the function of propositionality in language began to be questioned. Despite of that, the observation of Malinowski, that

> "there is nothing more dangerous than to imagine that language is a process running parallel and exactly corresponding to mental process, and that the function of language is to reflect or to duplicate the mental reality of man in a secondary flow of verbal equivalents" (Malinowski 1935, *apud* Silverstein 1977),

is an alert valid today — we are still living in the domain of referentiality.

To indicate the degree to which this vision prevails, let me exemplify with the case of Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists' approach in general, who have viewed the relationship between grammar (language) and culture as mirrors of each other, proposing a structural analogy between these two levels of description according to

Saussure. But if we accept that language goes beyond its referential function, we open a space for other uses and functions of language that derive from what Malinowski called the "context of situation." These functions and uses come from properties intrinsic to language; that is to say, they are not added *after* or *when* language is put in use, they are inherent to the phenomenon of language itself. (Here, the obvious references are Peirce, Jakobson and Austin, and the case of personal pronouns an obvious example of a sign in which referential and indexical aspects are combined — depending upon who enunciates and to whom, the meaning of pronouns changes. On other hand, certain verbs are, by their very nature, performative, such that to say is to do.)[13]

The most immediate consequence of this relationship between verbal enunciation and the context of situation is that language and culture are not related isomorphically but rather by means of a relationship between part and whole, that is to say, language is part of culture. As a result, linguistics becomes associated with anthropology not as two parallel disciplines; in fact one cannot dispense the other. Ethnography without knowledge of the native language is unthinkable in theory (though common in practice) just as grammatical studies without understanding the function or use of forms of speech, impossible.

Thus, if culture encompasses language, it is possible that mutual advantage be taken by anthropology and linguistics. There is a relative consensus that the theory of language (including linguistics and philosophy) was one of the most developed fields of knowledge in this century. This development began early on, and spread to the humanities. The social recognition of anthropology occurred later; it was after the Fifties that the discipline was accepted as an important alternative source of ideas to common sense, contributing to challenge Western-ethnocentric values from sociological theories.

As in a set of Russian dolls, speech acts and/or rites may be seen as types of cultural/social events and both i) theories of language and ii) anthropology can collaborate analytically in the study of these phenomena. Furthermore, just as aphasia revealed basic (metaphoric and metonymic) mechanisms of common language, so

[13] Silverstein (1977:125) posits that truly undefined phrases are only those in which no element depends on the context of situation. These are exactly the enunciations that are important to the linguistic theory of Chomsky (and other theories that adopt a similar methodology).

ritual can clarify fundamental mechanisms of a specific social repertory. In other words, speech and rites — those phenomena that can be cut out from the sequence of social acts — are good to examine (as cults were for Durkheim), indicating a good trail to the "elementary forms" of social life. One of the great lessons of anthropology lies in this simple but basic fact: the laws of association applied to magic, rituals, totemism, enchantments, etc. are not *qualitatively* different from language or daily social action. Here, once again, the clairvoyance of Mauss is evident when he indicated that the world of magic "is superimposed on the other world without detaching itself from it." Indeed, it seems that the moment has arrived for us to proceed in a movement opposed to that of the beginning of anthropology, that is to say, instead of focusing on the strange and exotic, return our sight to regular social life, well-equipped with the discoveries that were made for moments or phenomena once considered exceptional.

V
Riots as rituals

The fact that anthropology stores a large repertory of empirical evidence, the cumulative result of fieldwork in diverse cultures, and the fact that the discipline continually refines its theoretical instruments on the basis of controlled comparison, allows for a movement in which the elucidation of new phenomena in different societies is totalized in ever more renovated theories. It can thus be said that anthropology is universalistic by disposition, but it is enriched, enlarges its repertory and becomes more sophisticated theoretically when confronted with new empirical universes. Since the object of anthropology is not passive, it returns to whom it addresses as new agencies (the *kula*, the *potlatch*, *mana*), stimulating theoretical refinement. From this process we may say that anthropology is specified in action and becomes "anthropology *of* politics," "anthropology *of* religion," "anthropology *of* violence," "anthropology *of* indigenous societies," "anthropology *of* modernity," and so on — putting an end in the old subdivisions of "political anthropology," "philosophical anthropology," "economic anthropology," etc.

It is from this perspective that the latest book by Stanley Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*, published in 1996 can be examined, though it will surprisingly combine an array of anthropology *of* collective violence, *of* ethnonationalist conflits, *of* riots, *of*

modernity.[14] Having previously published two books on collective violence in Sri Lanka (Tambiah 1986, 1992), in a more or less evident sense Tambiah has given continuity to them. These books followed a trilogy about Buddhism and politics in Thailand (1970, 1976, 1984), a project developed at the same time as his theoretical essays on ritual (Tambiah 1979, 1985).

Until then, though theoretical approaches were proposed in the historical-sociological essays, it was possible to notice a certain specialization between studies which were intended as theoretical essays and the monographs.[15] In *Leveling Crowds* these two orientations are combined in the fullest sense: Tambiah uses ritual analysis to outline his book within the monographic tradition. On one hand, we find the ideas about a performative approach to ritual; on the other, the contemporary events of collective violence in South Asia. By engaging in a dialogue between theory — which in the case of anthropology is based on present and past ethnography — and contemporary events, Tambiah gives proof and recognition of the plasticity and richness of the discipline, of its (Weberian) "eternal youth".

Leveling Crowds discusses ethnonationalist conflicts and collective violence in South Asia by means of an empirical object: riots. Riots are episodes of major collective violence that have caused perplexity among social scientists in general, among the broader public, and among journalists and the media due to its ubiquity and magnitude in the world today. For the presentation of the several episodes of riots, Tambiah uses academic texts, official reports, journalistic material and his own experience.

The first part of the book includes the narration of specific cases in the space/time of Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan during the last hundred years: between Buddhists and Catholics (Sri Lanka, 1883), Buddhists and Muslims (Sri Lanka, 1915), Buddhists and Tamils (Sri Lanka, 1956-83), Hindus and Sikhs (India, 1984), Hindus and Muslims (India, 1992), Muhajirs and Sindhis (Pakistan, 1988-90), Muhajirs and Pathans (Pakistan, 1985-6). The sequential reading of innumerable episodes, by exposing the reader to a wide diversity of collective violence, has the illocutionary force of

[14] The book was object of two reviews in Brazil (Comerford 1998, Chaves 1999).

[15] Tambiah explains this distinction, pointing out that frequently only specialists of these cultural areas read monographic books. Thus, he notes that the majority of his theoretical contributions went unnoticed when they were developed in monographs (see Tambiah 1996a).

reaffirming a pattern.

In this sense, this part is more than the mere collection of ethnographic cases and evidences. The successive reading of violent acts that are repeated one after another — the acts of pillage, sacks, murders, arson, property destruction, looting, burning by mobs — affects the reader by the impact and trauma of violence, but also allows for the recognition that, recurrent and repetitive, and irregardless of the involved actors and the ethnic groups in conflict, the understanding of this type of phenomena of the modern world demands from social scientists a new approach. For context, as if knitting the narrative, Tambiah inserts comparisons with contemporary events as well as with events from Western history. And, in the midst of the text, Tambiah presents two interlinked notions in order to convey the trajectory of riots: *focalization* and *transvaluation*. The author wants to focus attention to the processes by which a series of local and small-scale incidents, occasioned by religious, commercial or interfamilial disputes, and involving people in direct contact with one another, cumulatively build up into larger and larger clashes between growing numbers of antagonists only indirectly involved in the original disputes (1996c: 81). In this process, less local context-bound loyalties and cleavages (such as race, religion, language, place of origin) substitute, under the influence of rumors and other means, the original local incidents. To sum up: "focalization progressively denudes local incidents and disputes of their contextual particulars, and transvaluation distorts, abstracts, and aggregates those incidents into larger collective issues of national or ethnic interest" (: 81).

In the second part of the book, the narrative continues, but now the aim is to confront the theoretical questions about collective violence. In looking for a repertory of tumults, Tambiah observes that riots, these apparently spontaneous, chaotic and orgiastic phenomena, reveal organized, anticipated, and programmed features, as well as recurrent phases. It is possible to distinguish a pattern of provoking events that lead to riots and the sequence of violence, to establish their duration, and to verify who are the participants (the "faces in the crowd"), the places where they start and spread, and how they finish. It is also possible to observe through which mechanisms they expand, and to verify the central role of rumors (seen as self-fulfilling), thus making them efficient in the construction, production and propagation of violent acts. Rumors are the cause of panic and paranoia, but they are also the products of panic and paranoia. To the degree that they are constantly repeated, the supposedly barbarian acts of the enemy circulate, are reelaborated and distorted, generate other rumors and, finally, the panic and fury produced by rumors lead to a perpetration of acts as cruel as those attributed

to the enemy. Rumors are cruelly efficient in these contexts.

Riots thus present syntactic aspects that, though they do not exhaust contingent events of their pragmatic meaning, are based on a repertory whose elements are usually selected from routine forms of sociability, such as the ritual calendar of festivities, sanctions and popular punishments, rituals of purification and exorcism. These elements can be imitated, inverted and parodied in accordance with their dramatic and communicative possibilities. Conducting a reverse *potlatch*, crowds that are enlisted in riots are neither homogeneous nor composed of criminals or the unemployed, as common sense would make believe, but reflect part of the social-economic profile of cities such as Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Karachi and Colombo and are constituted by factory workers, bus drivers, railway workers, vendors in bazaars and small shops and students, as well as national and municipal politicians, local agents and the police.[16]

The focus on the routinization and ritualization of violence and its collective character allows for the clarifying of an enigma: why do brutalities committed by members of an inflamed crowd in the name of a "valid" political cause to a collectivity (either an ethnic group or nationality) not leave psychological marks in the aggressor at the individual level? The ritualization aspects also allow us to understand why, after outbreaks of violence — riots always have a short duration — the participants soon go back to their normal life and continue to live together with their (old) enemies. In terms of the timing of violence, the combination of multiple religious calendars produces situations such that many times the noise of festivities of one ethnic group coincides with the reclusion period of another — this is one of the frequent causes of the beginning of riots. Other public events potentially embodied with violence include: processions displaying portraits of public figures and carrying emotive public symbols, and placards with inflammatory slogans which are then rhythmically chanted; rallies with mass stereotyped oratory with mythic-historic allusions, transmitted and amplified through loudspeakers, television and VCRs — noisy propaganda seems effective in the "demonization" of the enemy. Still other provoking events are intimidation of opponents through bomb explosions in public places; the presence of thugs at voting booths; hate mail and threats of assassination; distribution of bribes to facilitate the movement of crowds; challenges, insults and desacralization of religious symbols (1996c: 230-235).

[16] For a discussion of riots as cases of reverse *potlatch*, see Tambiah (1996c: 122, 279).

The design of this part of the book is based on a movement (which began with empirical evidence) towards larger general questions. Thus, at another interpretative level, Tambiah seeks to understand how these urban phenomena include destruction of property with the clear intention of social leveling. Advantages that are perceived in the opponent must be eliminated and the injustice suffered by the oppressor, compensated. Another aspect is that both aggressors and victims are almost always neighbors: either they live in the same cities, or side by side in districts or nearby cities. In a characteristic way, differences of belief are only transformed into hate and violence when previous relationships existed. Another consideration is about the dynamic of the conflicts: the motivation for the desired and imagined unity of an ethnic collectivity is frequently difficult to achieve due to internal differences.

In other words, even within ethnic groups there is no homogeneity. There is not one crowd, but many crowds within an ethnic group; the crystallization of large collectivities that are self-named Singalese, Tamil, Sikh and Hindu are episodic and contextual. These same collectivities are cross-cut by factional, sectarian, caste, class, regional and economics interests which generate many possible scenarios, making the violence of riots dramatic and intense. Tambiah highlights, with a seemingly purpose of challenging some vanguard positions:

> "We should not forget that sections of the civilian populace may collide, both with the aid of state agents whose loyalties are divided and against the representatives of the state taking part in the conflict. These are complexities that no contemporary witness of ethnic conflicts can forget or mute. There is no monolithic archenemy called 'colonialism' available to be excoriated; and one cannot romanticize contemporary South Asian ethnic riots as pure 'resistance' and the attendant acts of arson, homicide, and injury as commensurate with a 'conscious undertaking' on the part of the rioters (1996c: 317).

In a theoretical crescendo, in the last part of the book Tambiah revisits Le Bon and Durkheim: for the former, crowds had a desestabilizing, destructive and degenerative character; for the latter, they were a source of sacred feelings and representations, i.e., collective practice that celebrated solidarity and social integration. Tambiah also develops a dialogue with E. P. Thompson and the historians of the subaltern studies, detecting a conversation between them, and asking whether the argument for the "moral economy," developed to explain European riots of the 18th century, can be

applied to contemporary riots in South Asia.

His answer is negative. The conflicts of today develop in a context where there is no crystallized and coherent ideology, nor a corpus of norms and political practices acceptable to and shared by the majority of the population. Indeed, there is a crisis with respect to the idea of the nation-state. Political parties appeal to norms, traditions and particularistic values and divide proponents into protagonists and antagonists in an arena in which there does not exist a "unified moral political economy."

In fact, the national dimension runs contrary to a unified practice. This occurs, for example, in what Tambiah calls the process of *parochialization*, i.e., when a national issue is reproduced in diverse local places, exploding like a cluster bomb in multiple context-bound ways. (The opposite and complementary process would be represented in the radiating out of a local cause or event to become a condensed symbol signifying the whole.)[17] Thus, the paradoxical question that South Asia (and particularly India) poses for the modern world is related to the fact that participative democracy, elections, mass militancy and ethnic violence are not conflictive *in action.* Today, ethnicity is a dominant force, incorporating and spreading religious, linguistic, territorial, class and caste identities and interests, but it is also the umbrella under which personal, familial, commercial, and other local ideas and interests converge.

In short, for Tambiah:

> "The crisis of nation-state in South Asia (and many other places) is dialectically linked with the surge of ethnonationalism. In India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, the attempt to realize the nation-state on a Western European model has virtually failed. The nation-state concept has not taken deep roots in South Asia or generated a widespread and robust participatory 'public culture' that celebrates it in widely meaningful ceremonies, festivals, and rituals. The 'independence day' parades and speeches, the opening of Parliament, the weak affirmations of the secular state in the face of sectarian claims to special treatment, and other markers of nation-state existence pale in

[17] *Nationalization* and *parochialization* are thus contrasted to the processes of *focalization* and *transvaluation.* The first two are related top-down and from center-to-periphery; the second two, bottom-up and from periphery-to-center. See especially Tambiah 1996c: 257.

> public support and relevance when compared to the scale and intensity of calendrical religious and ethnic festivals" (1996c: 265).

Comparing the South Asian case to the Western experience, the author concludes that the cultural repertory of this region does *not* offer the foundations for the civic life of the nation-state. (To paraphrase Mauss, it seems there is no world upon which to superpose the magic of the nation-state *without detaching itself from it.*) For Tambiah,

> "[t]he rituals and affirmations surrounding the monarchy as embodying national unity in Britain and the celebrations of 'civil religion' focused on nation-making events in the United States have no real parallels in the new nation-states of South Asia. The truly engaging foci of a public culture are to be found in the arena and festivities linked to features of communal life, associated with literature, recitations, texts, sagas, mythologies, and popular theater, which celebrate and enact religiopolitical and social memories and concerns of collectivities in place for a long time. This is why, for instance, the divisive themes but effective presentations of Hindi nationalism, Sikh nationalism, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and Dravidian nationalism so greatly constitute and dominate mass politics and participation in elections" (1996c: 265).

Thus, the episodes of ethnic violence challenge the post-Enlightenment prophecies that the decline of religion was inevitable. These episodes also challenge the idea that loyalties and primordial feelings would disappear or diminish to the degree that national interests become dominant. The explosions of violence continue to defy conventional social science with respect to modern democracies. For Tambiah, theorists of South Asian politics should make room today for militant electoral politics and collective violence as "an integral component of their theories of democracy at work" (1996c: 261). If the ideal normative description of democracy is that of a rational system of representative government where citizens as individuals make rational choices according to their interests and values, in South Asia democracy is also a manner of conducting mass politics.

By focusing on religion in national contexts, *Leveling Crowds* reveals the complexities of the modern world's ideals and practices. For Tambiah, his analysis has led him to conclude that

> "[t]he time of becoming the same is also the time of claiming to be different. The time of modernizing is also the time of inventing tradition, as well as traditionalizing innovations; of revaluing old categories and recategorizing new values; of bureaucratic benevolence and bureaucratic resort to force; of participatory democracy and dissident civil war. The time is not simply one of order, or disorder, or antiorder: it is compounded of all three" (1996c: 342).

In sum: here is a grand picture of modernity as seen first and foremost through empirical phenomena (as riots, rumors, violent acts); *Leveling Crowds* combines micro-ethnography and macro-sociology in a way that enlivens the possibilities of anthropological analysis. By investigating collective violence with the tools of ritual analysis, Tambiah indicates how old theories may serve new purposes when the empirical object is well cut in the tense confrontation between native ideals and values, and anthropological comparison.[18]

In fact, the book also testifies to the long road by which anthropology had to travel for the past decades. From the discussions on the relationship between religion, magic, and science we have moved to a moment when ritual is transformed, from a unique and special kind of phenomenon, as it used to be, to an analytical perspective which makes it a *kind of event*, or, conversely, makes events *kinds of rituals*. In the process, what proved ingenious to understand magical acts and rituals was transformed into good to analyse social events. Whether as conventional "rituals," or as crucial or recurrent events of a society, they indicate to us the way, not to the human mind, but to lived cosmologies and practices, and their movements and changes. Lévi-Strauss's has been proven right in his promise that anthropology had always been well-prepared for world changes: *Leveling Crowds* is a proof that the discipline has remained — as timely suggested by Michael Fischer — the most useful of checks on theorizing becoming parochial, ethnocentric, generally uncomparative, uncosmopolitan, and sociologically ungrounded.

[18] Comerford (1998) points to the Weberian dimension of the book, as when Tambiah indicates the multiple layers in the life of communities, and makes explicit the "faces in the crowd"as well as the "religious" values in question.

VI
Epilogue

Writing an essay is always an incomplete business. I want to point to two aspects related to the previous discussion: one, methodological, focuses on the relationship between events and coincidences; another, from the perspective of the politics of theory, centers on the uses and functions of analysis of events as opposed to interpretive narratives.

1st : Events and chances

According to common sense, collective violence such as the riots in South Asia described by Tambiah are hardly rituals. We are used to associating rituals to auspicious performances, to passages, celebrations, and to cure of illnesses and affliction. However, three aspects need consideration: first, the people of South Asia, the natives, mark these events as different from routine events; second, these are collective performances designed to achieve a determined end — they are purposive; third, the events have an order, a pattern, that structures them. These are the major features of ritual action in the heuristic and non-absolute definition that Tambiah proposed in 1979. In this case, these phenomena have a specific designation — they are riots — and, although apparently spontaneous, irrational and chaotic, when analyzed they reveal anticipated and standard features, with a determinate duration and recurrent phases. Though not called rituals by natives, it is to the ethnographer to develop the sensibility to recognize in them their rituals aspects — just as Mauss did in relation to the *potlatch*. And if Mauss used the ritual destruction of property in order to develop a theory of exchange, it is possible to use riots as a central node from which to discuss contemporary aspects of the nation-state and of democracy in ethnically plural contexts.

Events such as the *potlatch* and riots are produced from a cultural repertory that does not make them anomalies in sociological terms. Indeed, producing intensified, exalted events, and (in South Asia) collective violence, it is due to their "familiarity" that they become a challenge to the social scientist. The basic question arises from a comparative perspective: what makes ethnicity, more than liberty and individual equity, the central issue of participative democracy in many multiethnic societies of the modern world? *Leveling Crowds* teaches us about the benefits of

(re)constructing cultural repertories and cosmologies from ritualized events — in this case, tragic ones in terms of cherished modern values, including those of the social scientist.

But events of this nature have yet another face which must be confronted: on one hand, they are recognized as grammatical in a particular culture — as already pointed to; on the other hand, they occur in particular moments and contexts that are not possible to anticipate. That is to say, though the passage of a festive procession in front of another ethnic group's temple may incite violence and tumult, it is not a sociological fatality that a major riot will necessarily occur. Social life is unforeseeable, imponderable and unpredictable.

Sociological and historical discussions have dealt with the topic of chances at length (Weber 1992), as well as historians of science (Latour 1995). Causality is not the issue in the present context, but the events' analysis and interpretation — the point in case is the emergence of "a historical subject," to use a Weberian expression. But I want to suggest that the analytical expansion of rituals to a society's critical events requires that one concedes a *sui generis* autonomy to the phenomena under examination, i.e., it is necessary to recognize that, being *events*, they have, at least partially, "their own cause" — events have elements that make them unpredictable, a surprise, a difference. If this were not so, it would not be an event, but the enactment of a potentiality, the mere playing out of a cause, the actualization of a structure.[19]

On the other hand, it is precisely these specific unexpected and unanticipated aspects of events — as opposed to conventional rituals — that have as a consequence the expansion and magnifying of "perlocucionary effects."[20] Though illocutionary acts are conventional acts, perlocutionary acts are *not* conventional — they are the unanticipated results that derive from the particular contexts in which they occur. But it is exactly here that, once again, *Leveling Crowds* surprises us when Tambiah points to

[19] See Latour (1995) with respect to the encounter between Pasteur and the lactic acid: "For there to be history, the yeast-of-1857-at-Lille-with-Pasteur must in part be *causa sui*" (:19). See also Sahlins (1981) for the relationship between event and structure. For chances, see Peirano (1995).

[20] Austin (1962) indicated that it is characteristic of a "locutionary act" to have (predominantly) meaning; of an "illocutionary act" to have a certain conventional force — it is a performative act which does something (as implied in promising, ordering, apologizing, warning). Yet "perlocutionary effects" refer to what is brought about or achieved by an act; it refers to both the intended and unintended consequences of an act (Austin 1962: 121; Tambiah 1985: 79).

patterns in these consequences: what was a possibility, potentiality or probability of violent expansion and intensification, in the case of South Asia may take the form of two pairs of processes conceived as "focalization" and "transvalorization," and "nationalization" and "parochialization." For these consequences and outcomings of collective violence we could tentatively propose the label, contradictory in principle, of "perlocucionary processes." They would not be perlocutionary (unintended) effects, but (expected social) processes.The identification of these processes is a fundamental step in revealing the strong bonds between ritual and event, and one may expect that focalization/transvaluation and nationalization/parochialization reach well beyond South Asia. This important issue I am only signaling for further development.

2nd : Events and stories

Another theme that I will only mention is related to political responsibility as an intrinsic dimension of the social sciences, whether implicit or explicit. Stanley Tambiah, born in South Asia, calls attention to this link. In his words:

> "The conundrum that faces many of us South Asians is this: while we all should make the effort to comprehend and appreciate the reasons for the rejection of Western secularism by certain religious communities, we also have to face up to the question of what policy to put in its place in an arena where multiple religious communities with divergent political agendas contest one another and make claims that threaten to engender discrimination and inequality among citizens who in principle must enjoy the same civil rights and should peacefully coexist " (1996c: 19).

By recalling that since birth the social sciences were engaged in the long-term political projects for the 19th century, I conclude this essay with a provocation. In ethnographic research there is always an occurrence, whether this be an event, a story, narration, drama, that attains a certain type of privilege as the crucial ethnographic moment. Facts are made, empirical evidence constructed. But the articulation of experiences that the fieldworker lives and participates in (or that is experienced as document or memory by natives) requires not only textual support, but cognitive and psychic anchors that may help totalize the experience. The appropriation of the ephemeral moment (or of the "revealing incident") has in the experience of the discipline the exemplary case that led Mauss, after an analysis of the *kula* and the *potlatch*, to express the caution the ethno-

logist must have when faced with "what is given" (*ce qui est donné*). I repeat Mauss's words, so as to leave no doubt:

> "Or, le donné, c'est Rome, c'est Athènes, c'est le Français moyen, c'est le Mélanésien de telle ou telle île, et non pas la prière ou le droit en soi" (Mauss 1925: 182).

It is within this tradition that we may associate Tambiah's choice of South Asian riots as the critical incidents for his monograph. They represent the tangible, the experienced, the episodic but brutal suffering, the crucial instant for the aprehension of an otherwise distant event, the crossing over of time and space. It is because they evoke such powerful lived dimensions that they may reconcile theoretical-intellectual objectives with political-pragmatic ones. They are Tambiah's "Rome, Athens, the Melanesian of such and such an island."[21]

But is this practice dominant in the discipline? The answer is no. In contrast to the choice of the event, for over a decade anthropologists of the U. S. academy have chosen the rhetorical style narratives and stories as a political option in a context in which exoticism, having dominated the outlook of the discipline for a century, today causes an intense discomfort in a world that praises equality, even when it is at a considerable distance.[22] Now that *realistic* ethnography is condemned, the authority of the anthropologist as author questioned, the validity of facts denounced, and a non-colonial world projected, new possibilities for the construction of ethnographic texts include fieldnotes, biographies, interviews, science fiction, manifestos, commentaries.

It is in this context that I submit a comparison between the challenge of *analysing events*, on one hand, and *telling stories*, on the other, taking the risk of proposing a new dichotomy and thereby increase the list of the too many already existent in the discipline. But it is impossible not to recognize these two ideal types in contemporary anthropology that, indeed, correspond to different constructions of the

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[21] I include in this tradition the following recent books: Das 1995, Amin 1995, Trouillot 1995. Other works, these directly influenced by Tambiah's approach to ritual are Trajano (1984, 1993, 1998), Chaves (1993, 2000), Comerford (1993, 1999), Teixeira (1996, 1998), Steil (1996) as well as Aranha (1993), Santos (1994), Góes Filho (1999), Little (1995) .

[22] Peirano (1997, 1998, 1999); see also Dirks 1998.

object.[23] Where this object was once defined by exoticism, anthropology today is in crisis (and it is hidden in *studies*, i.e., cultural studies, feminist studies, science studies, etc); where the object is founded in difference (whether social, cultural, or any other type) the analysis of events is appropriate to synthesize, enlarge, support and strengthen a kind of knowledge that continues to seek to be universalistic but multicentered in its manifestations. A clarification is necessary: if all exoticism is a kind of difference, not every difference is exotic; difference compares and evokes relationships, while exoticism separates and isolates; difference produces comparative (political) theory, exoticism produces militancy, but apart from ethnography. In an intentional way, narratives have become a rhetorical option for some anthropologists; in a less conscious way, analyses of events have caused us to examine some basic presuppositions of social life, sometimes delving into (Durkheimian) elementary forms. I thus propose that the analysis of rituals/events has an elective affinity with the option for *difference* — that we must explore in its endless possibilities.

[23] Of course, different approaches are also in question, as attested to by Tambiah's characterization of Geertz's *Negara* as a "decidedly nonannalistic account" (Tambiah 1985:316).

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