

Response

to Leslie Devereaux

*Between You and Me: Reaching for Understanding
in Anthropology and Analysis**Some Phenomenological Psychoanalytic Reflections
on Ethnographic Field-Research*

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Leslie's paper has an organic personal, ethnographic, clinical and poetic integrity which should remain intact. Therefore, the best way to comment on it is by choosing to reflect on the vicissitudes of ethnographic understanding as a fellow-anthropologist with a related, yet somewhat different, life-trajectory and epistemic commitments, notwithstanding the passion for phenomenology and psychoanalysis that I share with Leslie. However, as a consummate ethnographer, and without ethnography there would be no anthropology deserving of that name (i.e., the critical knowledge of human existence), I will just make one remark which enhances the ethnographic substance of Leslie's paper. In her discussion of the woollen belt, emblematic of Zinacantec femininity, Leslie says that these women 'are almost never fully unclothed'. I clearly remember that when she originally told me about this feminine habitus of Zinacantec existence, I asked if this also applied to sexual intercourse. She said that it did and then went on to describe how, in intercourse, a Zinacantec woman loosens her belt while the man crawls underneath her skirt, re-emerges through the waist-open-

ing and, in that, I can say, all female envelopment, they proceed to make love. It seems to me that implicit here there is an entire libidinal dramaturgy of Zinacantec (male and female) selfhood, its gender difference and micro-dialectics of power and intimacy.

After this concrete ethnographic preamble I will reflect on a few key aspects of the core anthropological experience – ethnographic research – but, as psychoanalytically grounded practice which has a long tradition in anthropology (e.g., Roheim, 1932, 1945; Layard, 1945; Devereaux, 1967; Mimica, 2007a).¹ To conduct a systematic psychoanalysis as an ethnographer in relation to individual (local) co-workers facilitates a better management and understanding of the personally very demanding and self-alienating experiences which commonly characterise ethnographic research and are constitutive of its results (see Devereux, 1967). Furthermore, I hold that, in so far as it purports to be a productive science of human existence, anthropology has to be founded upon phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Castoriadis' (1987) theoretical work provides one particular lead which may be used to implement, through concrete work, the unsurpassed horizons of psychoanalytic anthropology developed by Freud, Jung, Rank, and Roheim.² What I advocate is a self-critical ethnographic psychoanalysis which is shaped by self-transformative transference-countertransference relations between the ethnographer and the specific individuals (informants) who mediate for the ethnographer their life-world and its constitutive imaginary (e.g., Mimica, 2006, 2007; Weiss and Stanek, 2007). In trying to reach the depths of the culture that he/she is exploring, the very foundations of the ethnographer's egoity are in question. What is challenged is the most cherished and deeply ingrained sense of humanness as the function of one's own egoity. In this regard, Devereux's (1967) insights are as vital as ever.

In doing ethnography, one's character and personality structure are both the limiting and facilitating conditions of the ethnographic project itself. Here, a self-reflective exercise has to be carried out in a Malinowskian mode

(1967). The ethnographer has to work through his/her own egoic self-erosion, defences and projections, and, equally so, through the defences and projections of the informants (Mimica, 2003a, 2007). Through this process the ethnographer is genuinely creating a critical understanding grounded in the depths of his/her and other people's psychic being. Unless one is willing to work self-critically at this level, ethnographic understanding will not break out of the limitations of the ethnographer's self-idealizations grounded in his/her inner archaic-narcissistic³ position. Only through the modification of this self-deceiving yet vital threshold of the ethnographer's subjectivity will a self-reflective and critical method produce a more acute and objective mode of ethnographic understanding. In this sense, the theoretical basis of an empirically validated *verstehen* (Weber) method must necessarily be developed through phenomenology and psychoanalysis. No formula application or supervision is a viable solution; every practitioner has to discover the objective possibilities of subjective understanding in the first person, and through empirical practice.

If one aspires to perfectibility in the field of indefinite knowledge shaped by omnipresent ignorance, that is, if the ethnographer aspires to an ever more accurate ethnographic knowledge and its synthesis into theoretical understanding, the only way is through intensive and, in principle, endless concrete work; a permanent self-modification which can be characterised as an intrapsychic surgery by one's own hand - and without anaesthetic. One can learn it all from Freud, Jung, Klein, Fairbairn, Winnicott and Guntrip, or Husserl and Sartre. And, of course, in the process one is making errors. The only remedy is that one must be willing to endeavour to detect and duly correct them. This, in turn, requires more fieldwork, more self-exercise of authentic relations with one's own fieldwork experience and labour, more thinking, more suffering. All in all this is a worthy endeavour but not because, as one ethnographer recently put it 'anthropology may be an impossible dream (which may die, if not nurtured)' (Herdt, 2001:28). This is an idealisation, hence the rhetorical incantation 'anthropology as an impossible dream' - as if

the twenty-five years of his own professional life in leading American institutions and numerous grants weren't enough to convince him that (at least as an academic profession) anthropology is a wholly socio-economically and politically realised practice which allows him and numerous other anthropologists to pursue it as a self-project which they actualise every which way. And, when it is practised as a self-critical and self-responsible activity, at its best, it may be humanising, in the sense that one may choose to make the best possibilities out of one's own, far from perfect and perfected, being.

An ethnographer neither lives the life nor dies the death of the people s/he is working with. And yet, it is the interrelations between the two, and the dynamics of human passions and radical imagination, that constitute the ontological nexus of any given life-world. To be sure, human facticity does not exist outside of its own human self-constitution. Intrinsic to every society, being the field generated as the dynamic structure of egoic bodily intersubjectivity, is the internal self-defence against itself, its own weaknesses, vulnerability, and sham, and amplification of its own ideality and omnipotence. Every human society is constructed as a synthesis of its own ambivalence and the primordial autogenerative schizoity that generates its own self-totalisation. Power, exploitation, violence, and distortions; vulnerability and sham, are not to be approached as primarily the symptoms of failure at the synthesis, but the very reality of every human social synthesis. Therefore, for every anthropologist the preparatory task is to open him/herself up to a mood which discloses this very situation of the total humanness, and it demands a creative effort, the effort to create a new horizon of intelligibility correlative with a particular ethnographic encounter. To descend into the pleroma of total humanness, and to behold with understanding its expression in each particular human situation, one has also to recognise it in oneself and, as such, to acknowledge this transpersonal ontological horizon of the psychic being over and against one's own social-cultural-historical, moral and intellectual finality. Herein is the permanent relevance of psychoanalysis and anthropology in the conquest of human ignorance and the creation of knowledge, truth and human freedom.

The acuteness of ethnographic understanding depends on a will to enter into this pleromatic matrix of existence, which psychoanalysis and phenomenology can clarify and deepen like no other framework of critical reflection, providing that it is practised with a total commitment to the project of ethnography for which 'one's character in relation to one's life' (Levi-Strauss, 1973:58-59) is in need of self-critical transformation rather than self-reconciliation. One can reconcile oneself with oneself, but he or she can still misunderstand both oneself and other humans. Ignorance, self-deception and false consciousness are not taken care of by any techniques of reconciliation. Rather, the latter requires the former. In this view, anthropology is far from being an impossible dream. And its self-transcending actualisation is effected through each individual practitioner's *will to true* self-recognition and the *will* to choose to act accordingly as an epistemic subject.

Critical to ethnographic-psychoanalytic practice is the recognition of the vicissitudes of the narcissistic depths of the human egoic self (its archaic core), the ethnographer's no less than that of the individuals s/he is working with. There is no possibility of escaping the archaic narcissistic dynamism of the egoic un/consciousness but one can learn how to recognise it without feeling defeated, thereby being able to choose self-knowledge and use it constructively; indeed, use it in the service of the creation of a more realistically viable, self-grounded and self-accountable knowledge of oneself and others.

Many anthropologists with - I shall call it - *refle-x*-tionist - sensibilities do not seem to appreciate sufficiently that a critical self-reflection is not the same as a narcissistic theatre of selective self-disclosure, a pseudo-drama of the idealised balance of the 'truth' of one's own limitations and actualisations, but rather it is a means of creating more accurate knowledge. There is no epistemological and concrete empirical gain to be derived from it. To be lucid about one's own limitations and to do something constructively about them is the basic step. A person with a healthy narcissistic equilibrium will know what to do:

swallow your self-idealisation, suspend your delusory desire for omnipotence and omniscience, and proceed to do work on your deficiencies and see how far you'll get in that regard. Concrete work is more likely to transform one's narcissistic desires and, in fact, it does yield far more gratifying objects since the project of ethnography is about concrete knowledge. And, since narcissistic desire is inexhaustible, one will be able to draw on it to propel oneself into more action whose aim is to conquer the problematic, resisting and titillating object. It is better to make the limitations real than to turn them into the narcissistic object of one's own idealised self-representations, which is what, more often than not, is managed in so many would-be self-reflexive ethnographies.

This is but a glossy metaphoric prop for the stage of self-representation. The 'critical' hyper-reflexivity evidenced in such writings is nothing else but the investigators' defensive self-consolidation within the shield of narcissistic self-mirroring which systematically occludes the real flaws, deficiencies, and the limitations in the dimension of concrete knowledge and understanding. The former purports to be the icing for the latter. An authentic, psychoanalytically-guided reflective turn is an altogether different operation. In taking up psychoanalysis and phenomenology one stands and falls by it, although not primarily through its application to others, but, firstly and recurrently, to oneself. What abounds in the purportedly self-reflective anthropological liturgy is an egoic circuitry which I call 'reflexivity', with the *x* inflection, to emphasise the fixed, blind, or routinized character of egoic self-regard which, precisely because of its automatism and routinized 'strategic' (i.e., opportunistic) modes of being oneself, brings into the scope of consciousness only those aspects which cancel and/or inhibit further need for self-understanding or critical self-modification.

Reflexivity is a closed-off circuit of the egoic self-regard determined by its own unpunctured narcissistic auto-scotoma. Two of its main qualities are cowardice and defensiveness, but projected as a higher (grandiose) morality.

Reflection, on the other hand, is a penetrating and critical self-regard which, with each current of the inward turning, spreads deeper and deeper into the realms of the egoic self, and attempts to comprehend its internal constitution. Relative to the intensity and depth of self-reflection, such circuitry is bound to destabilise, at some stage, the egoic dimension of the self, and among other effects, will cause depression, for it becomes evident that one is not exactly the kind of being that one aspired and assumed oneself to be. The narcissistic dynamics of these and other modes of the circuitry of the egoic self-regard, which now amounts to a struggle with the death instinct and a transformation of K link (Bion) through the transformation of the capacity to love self and object in relation to the truth-driven will to knowledge, cannot be dealt with here. My point, however, is that as an epistemophilic (Klein, Bion) pursuit, the practice of self-reflectivity has to engender and systematically sustain a genuine depressive position which alone will transform the practitioner into a mature epistemic, or more accurately, gnostic subject.

Coda: this practice of anthropological understanding through love and knowledge of humanity, borne out of authentic ethnographic encounters, has nothing to do with the degradation of anthropology, and critical knowledge at large, characteristic of current academic enterprise. Here, thinking has irreversibly succumbed to a greedy narcissistic pulverisation; what one presently witnesses in academe is a performative on-line packaging of a marketable knowledge-death.

NOTES

1. In what follows I reproduce a section from my unpublished work *On phenomenological psychoanalysis and the epistemology of ethnographic field-research*.
2. Castoriadis' views have to be clarified both in respect of his specific philosophical and psychoanalytic synthesis of understanding (i.e., his ideas and their conceptual articulation). He is a thinker who indeed thinks for himself within the Western philosophical tradition which he knows very well. But precisely as such he has to be critically elucidated in relation to that tradition and, especially, in relation to the field of psychoanalytic and ethnographic evidence.
3. In my formulations, narcissistic dynamics is not separable from the dynamics of instinctual drives. The archaic nucleus of the latter is what I call 'oral-ocular', indicating the immanent synthesis of narcissistic dynamics and the primordial sucking-digestive-groping instinctual self-circuitry. This is the core of the primal ideal-ego and the super-ego (well illustrated by Malinowski's (1967) self-account).

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