

MARCUS, G.E. and FISCHER, M.M.J. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

This is a useful little book, a quasi-state-of-the-art survey and a quasi-bibliographical essay. Written by two anthropologists. However, they use this form to suggest a general thesis and illustrate it by means of a local thesis. The general thesis is that all human sciences are experiencing a crisis and thus undergoing a transitional period: the existing, once-dominant "paradigms" have lost their hold, and no new ones have emerged to take their place. In such a transitional period as the one we are living through, the authors date its emergence from the '70s, many experiments are attempted at: inter-disciplinary fertilizations take place; disciplinary boundaries are willingly transgressed; concepts and ideas originating in, say, literary theory seem applicable elsewhere, say, in Anthropology. This is their local thesis: Anthropology is living through such an "experimental moment". Both the financial crunch facing the academia, and the lack of any hegemonic theory in anthropology has contributed to a phase, similar to the one between 1920's and '30s, where many different kinds of experiments in ethnography is underway. The literature of the last two decades which the authors use is meant to outline the forms and contents of these varied experimentations. In this sense, it is not just a quasi-bibliographical essay: the literature is used to give credence to the local thesis.

The authors see this transitional period as a sort of crisis: a *crisis of representation* as they call it. "This crisis arises from uncertainty about the adequate means of describing the social reality" (p. 9). And the crisis itself is due to the "shift to problems of interpretation of a reality that eludes the ability of dominant paradigms to describe it, let alone explain it" (p. 12). This concern with wanting to describe the details of the reality is what is common to the otherwise fragmented plethora of anthropological theories. They call this common ethnographic orientation as "interpretive anthropology", and describe in the bulk of their work the response of interpretive anthropology to the crisis of representation.

In the second chapter, they try to trace the origin of this common element in the history of anthropology. The late '60s and '70s see the emergence of interpretive anthropology due to the convergence of a whole number of theories and traditions; from Parsonian sociology to Hermeneutics, from linguistic theories to the Frankfurt school critical theory.

Within this interpretive anthropology, they further discern two trends or two poles of tension: there is, firstly, a tendency which, discovering the relative emptiness of the earlier ethnographic writing, focussed upon capturing the rich texture of the 'subjective' experiences as lived by individuals in different cultures. The second wants much more to relate the conventional ethnographic studies to the socio-economic processes. The authors call this political economy ethnographies. While Geertz would be the famous example of the first type, Willis or Fabian would belong to the second. Both these tendencies, and the variations within each of them, are illustrated in chapter 4 and 5. The third chapter looks at one set of concepts, "person, self and emotions" as they are used in ethnographic descriptions to highlight cultural differences.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, the authors look at the way ethnographic accounts have been "repatriated" and put to use in a critique of the culture to which the anthropologist belongs. An ethnographic study can be used by an anthropologist to put the obvious in his culture to doubt. Marcus and Fischer call this "defamiliarization", and look into two ways of doing this: epistemologically, i.e., by showing that the "world" of another culture is as much a construction as one's own, and by cross-cultural juxtaposition i.e. of the type of work that Mead undertook when she compared the Samoan adolescent to the American counterpart. In a concluding note, the authors briefly reflect upon the significance and possible directions of the 'experimental moment' they sketch.

The book is well-written, and is definitely interesting to read. In one sense, they succeed in conveying what they want to: that there is variety in anthropological treatises, some of them are interesting, many focus upon 'details of the reality' and do so in different ways etc. For someone not trained in anthropology, like myself, this is certainly a stimulating overviewed and, as the authors and the blurb of the book make clear, it is intended to reach an audience broader than the circle of practising anthropologists.

Despite these excellent qualities, it is not obvious to me that the theses, whether local or global, has been made plausible. To someone who shares the view that there is a crisis, the evidence accumulated by the authors is sufficient. But, if one does not share this view then the absence of argumentation becomes a very glaring lacuna. The 'crisis of representation', in such a case, appears as nothing but a selection criteria used by the authors to *choose* from the massive

literature in the domain. In our world of today, 'crises' appear to come cheap; we are inundated by them everyday: oil crisis, energy crisis, ecological crisis, debt crisis, economic crises...crisis in Lebanon, crisis in South Africa... the crisis in philosophy, the crisis in psychology etc. etc. The word has become so debased that it does not appear to signify much, an impression, alas, reinforced by this book as well.

Secondly, a bit uncharitably speaking perhaps, the vague gestures they do in the direction of the new is very uninspiring. When they comment on the significance of some 'experimental moments' they tend to be downright platitudinous (e.g. p. 108).

In a way, this book suffers from the basic weakness of being a quasi-bibliographical essay: there is a curious absence of any sustained argumentation. Crudely put, the basic impression one is left with is that lots of people are doing lots of different things in lots of different ways, and it is good that they continue to do this for some more time. One may want to call this an "experimental moment", but this label does not clarify much, because much like 'crisis' this is something that all of us have been doing all the time.

These comments are not meant to detract from the merits of this book. On the contrary. Rather, it is meant to suggest that *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* should be seen as a very preliminary attempt at proposing a hypothesis about the current state of human sciences. It will require much more, perhaps a different kind of work altogether, to make the idea acceptable. I do hope that the authors will try to do so: heaven knows, it is both urgent and important.