

THE POLITICS OF GESTURE: ETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS ON THE  
EMBODIMENT OF GLOBALIZATION

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There is a curious separation in anthropological writing between the desire to be “relevant” and to speak to the big issues on the one hand, and the equally powerful tendency to focus on very small details through which, in the most interesting work, the larger perspective becomes accessible through new and more intimate angles of vision. That synergy is relatively rare, however, and more commonly succumbs to such bizarre complementary exclusions as those between gesture and the lived environment. Aside from the relatively mechanistic efforts of writers such as E.T. Hall (1959) and Ray Birdwhistell (1952) to bring “proxemics” and “kinesics” into a relatively unified anthropology of space, the analysis of gesture has largely become a technical, quasi-linguistic exercise with virtually no analysis of the spatial organization of power or of the role of gesture in subverting that power.

Notable exceptions exist, especially in Wacquant's (2004) study of the pugilist's body and Alter's investigations of the Indian wrestler (1992) and the Indian yogi (2004); important studies of the regimentation of bodies in national sport (notably Brownell 1995) establish a clear connection between ideologies of identity and embodied practice.

But the *informal* and often *unacknowledged* (though not necessarily unrecognized) dimensions of gestural interaction rarely seem, except in the technical studies already mentioned, to merit extended treatment as channels for the highly localized reconfiguration of micropolitical relations.

Yet gesture is one of the few modalities that, *precisely because it does not involve verbalization*, usually – though not invariably – escapes the censoring eye of officialdom. (The exception is the generic discouragement of gesticulation in schoolchildren, but this simply serves to drive the phenomenon further into the shadows. It is the quintessence of the paradox of “intangible heritage”: its very evanescence is what makes it highly resistant to cataloguing or other forms of census.) The concept of public space – especially in the aftermath of numerous deconstructions of the public/private distinction – clearly cries out for recognition of the ways in which the public performance of dissent subtly but insistently undermines the pretensions of absolute power; it is entirely possible to walk through a *piazza* in ways that convey clear challenges to a ruler’s authority, and the intentional theatricality of that space enhances and even enables such challenges.)

Here Edwin Ardener’s (1971: xliv) concept of “blank banner” of protest would appear to be especially useful: people’s bodily stance may index a sense of unease with the *status quo* – a stance that does not amount to “resistance” in the sense popularized by James Scott (e.g., 1985; see, *contra*, Reed-Danahay 1993) nor even a more inchoate notion of “muddling through” (Scott 1998: 328 *et passim*; Reed-Danahay 1996), but rather something akin to the significantly named “cultural cringe” as articulated by cultural critics in Australia. Bourdieu (2004; see Reed-Danahay 2005: 25) clearly

recognized such patterns in his personal experiences of embodiment. While they are experienced individually, they coalesce as collective, cultural phenomena.

Indeed, it is important to remember that gesticulation is framed in the centers of power as the antithesis of logic, discursive precision, and dispassionate judgment. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Neapolitan “pantomime” – in practice a particularly precise mode of conveying certain kinds of message – was taken as a sign of the backwardness of southern Italians, a role that it has continued to play, at least implicitly, in much of the more popularizing ethnographic literature on the Italian south. The idea that gesture is emotive and *therefore* not semantically precise, rather like the similar prejudices voiced against Black Vernacular English (see Labov’s [1972] famous critique), is itself an expression of a condescension made possible by relations of extremely unequal cultural and economic power. As such, it confirms the warnings of the Italian anthropologist Franco Lai (1992) about the ways in which anthropological and local attributions of backwardness reinforce each other and thereby collude in the maintenance of the status quo.

That being the case, I would like, in this short presentation, to suggest that we anthropologists should pay much closer attention – as Bourdieu did toward the end of his life (see Reed-Danahay 2005: 28-29) – to what our own gestural patterns imply – not only to the subjective aspects of our performances, but also to the interpretations that our informants put on these. And I would like to begin with a vignette drawn, not from my own research (to which I will turn later), but from the excellent study of gambling and risk conducted by Thomas Malaby (2003, especially pp. 134-135) in the Cretan port town of Chania. In his richly self-mocking ethnographic description, Malaby pays exemplary

attention, not only to his own sensations at learning to hold a coffee tray correctly, but also to the amused but also profoundly didactic reactions of his local informants. After that I will briefly draw from my own successive experiences in fieldwork in three countries – Greece, Italy, and Thailand – in order to draw out what I see as the most important consequences for our understanding of the public sphere of being able to acquire mastery of a local gestural system. Let me anticipate the argument a little by saying that, while I do not discount the significance of mastery for its own sake and as providing access to particular kinds of information, perhaps the most valuable category of that information is experienced through our own bodily experiences of cringing and posturing by turns – something that few anthropologists ever describe in their ethnographies.

What Malaby especially draws out in his discussion of serving in the Cretan coffee-house is the way in which a whole ideology of masculine heroics in the face of risk, as well as a realistic assessment that the courageous risk-taker is more likely to succeed than the hesitant pedant, can be discerned in the management of the male body. When he was too gingerly in his attempt to carry a tray of full coffee cups to the customers in one of his favored coffee-houses, Malaby was told in no uncertain terms that this was inappropriately timid, and indeed, when he began to develop a more insouciant manner, his confidence grew and the cups seemed ever more secure. This is a world, let us remember, in which precise attention to petty monetary debts (Herzfeld 1991: 170) and measurement in craft production (see Herzfeld 2004) are both signs of weakness – of a pedantic scholasticism that has no place in the dangerous marketplace of male reputations. It is also a world in which a palpably inept bodily stance (*kormostasia*)

can elicit contempt (Herzfeld 1991: 000) – although please note an important point for my present argument, namely, that this can be and is articulated verbally.

Malaby does not in fact tell us much about the gestures that accompanied his transformation; one wishes someone had filmed the various stages of his apprenticeship. But the gradual mastery of the body-plus-space that his movements conveyed to his customers and informants also emerges with equal clarity for his readers. For the latter, moreover, it conveys an important sense of the way in which ideologies are sedimented in bodily practices (see Connerton 1989), although I would argue that this is also a space in which those same practices can be performatively deployed to bring about the kinds of ideational and attitudinal change that Gutmann (1996), for example, has observed in men in Mexico City.

Malaby's description shows that, even though this is a "nonverbal" scene, it is well understood – and verbalized -- by his informants, for whom it is quite explicitly a test. (Too often gesture has been treated either as a variety of impoverished language or as antithetical to language, neither of which is a helpful position, but both of which stem, I suspect, from a pervasive reluctance to credit our informants with discursive insight into their non-discursive habits.) It may well be that his presence as a tall, rather gangly American in a Cretan town made it easier for his informants to objectify what they found odd about his way of moving (and what one can also observe in Western European and North American students trying to learn the steps of Greek dances with an intense focus on detail that makes little sense to their teachers). Improvisational styles are often the space of social grace; compare the beeper-timed precision of the Starbucks production line with the complex social engagement of an Italian *barista* and one can easily perceive

the impact of industrialization and rationalization on the gestural component of social interaction.

Humans are *bricoleurs*, and history provides plenty of material for such an enterprise. Let me now shift my ethnographic focus to Rome, sometimes-reluctant capital of a major European country, but a place where locals pride themselves on living in “villages” (*paesi*). That pride is a bit deceptive; it goes hand-in-hand with a remarkable historiographical sophistication that is the envy of many other Italians, an ability to link the monuments and even the minor embellishments of the historic streets with a rich and to some extent popular historical literature. Roman informants who had enjoyed relatively short school careers were nonetheless adept users of local history, in part because this was a skill that brought access to the real resources of tourism, but predominantly because in Rome the peculiar form of agonistic relations consists in precisely this skill at relating one’s life to the imposing ruins and religious architecture as well as the more scabrous stories of the city’s once teeming back alleys.

At the same time, not all their knowledge of the past was expressed in verbal terms. In the course of my fieldwork in Rome I became especially fascinated by the frequency of a gesture made with hands clasped together in a syncopated up-and-down movement that expresses affectionate exasperation, resignation to the obvious and the inevitable, and a conviction that the speaker is right. Before I explain the relevance of this gesture, let me recall that especially left-leaning Romans in the *centro storico* tend to be fiercely anticlerical, and particularly recall the hardships their ancestors endured under papal rule; they attribute to the harshness and authoritarianism of the papal authorities

their own much-vaunted tendency to compromise with power while continuing to follow through on their own real intentions.

One butcher I asked about this, a man whose communist leanings and religious agnosticism made him especially acerbic about the role of the papacy in Roman history, used it to express his feelings about the fact that “we’ve sent the popes into exile... but the pope keeps coming back, I don’t know why” – a phrase expressed in a strong Roman accent and with dialect forms of which this man is self-consciously proud. When I asked him what the gesture was about, he did not try to gloss it with a “translation,” but answered. “The gesture? The gesture is like this, it’s a *papal* gesture!” This helpfully ambiguous response attributes the origins of the gesture to the papal hand blessing, but the fact that in everyday life it is used less in benediction than in amiable exasperation suggests that the historical claim was as ironic in intent as, under the circumstances, it sounded. I should add that I incorporated this discussion in my film on Roman men’s memories, *Monti Moments* (Herzfeld 2007), because I found that the power of this gesture to bring together different contexts of amused exasperation was every bit as telling as the historical pedigree that the butcher attributed to it. Thus, one man, an electrician, uses it to express his outrage at the banks’ failure to provide loans for those artisans and small merchants – the majority of the older population where I was living – and accompanies it with the remark, “Italy is a land of conniving idlers (*lazzaroni*)!” Another man, a retired taxi driver with a remarkable appetite for historical detail and a collector of historical books on Rome into the bargain, uses the same gesture to introduce the disreputable tales that he is intent on telling me, to the evident distress of the more respectable friend who was also participating in the conversation.

Given this context, the use of the gesture *about* the popes, no less than its attribution *to* the popes, suggests that beneath the resigned acceptance of papal power to which Romans attribute their long-lived sense of accommodation to power lies a capacity for irony that can always express itself through the body even when language must be suppressed. It would have been hard even in the most repressive days of papal rule to arrest someone for making the *tulipano* with his hands! And since the taxi-driver also wished to deflate the anthropologist – me – in a humorous vein, he uses the same gesture when telling his companion that “the professor wants to hear the criminal scandals of that time” and that he had once used “the professor’s” visiting card to get into a rather closely guarded library – he may be a fine amateur historian, as indeed anyone who saw the film would immediately see, but here was an institutional barrier that his cooptation of one figure of apparent authority allowed him to subvert – a multiple triumph of wit in all the senses of that word.

So, yes, gesture is often accompanied by a highly exegetical sense. Indeed, it seems to me that it is more often anthropologists who are less aware of their embodied self-expression. Dorinne Kondo (1990) felt uncomfortable in Japan because she *looked* Japanese but *moved* like a foreigner – thereby subverting well-established boundaries and challenging the contours of “place” (in Douglas’s [1966] sense). The interplay of phenotype and gesture is indeed of considerable importance, though not necessarily in ways that we anticipate. (Cretan villagers speak of a person’s *profora*, literally “pronunciation,” as meaning the way they “look.”) There is presumably also some mutual effect operating between language proficiency and the degree to which a visitor’s physical movements harmonize with those of the locals – and harmony may well be of



the essence; watching Thai women awaiting the start of a community meeting fanning themselves, initially individually and then gradually with greater and greater synchronization of their movements, suggested to me that the Thai-Buddhist ideals of harmony were literally embodied here, providing a soothing backdrop to the stormy discussions soon to follow. It struck me then that, as the women began to develop more and more choreographic symmetry in their movements, they also began to “look” more and more alike. They were preparing the cultural *basso continuo* for a space of public discourse.

But in fact I had a more direct personal experience of how language and gesture interacted through my own learning of Thai, and this offered an important insight into the ways in which the intimate access desired by anthropologists depends heavily on a mastery that in many cases is not self-consciously acquired even though it can form the explicit topic of a discussion both locally and with colleagues. When I first went to do fieldwork in Bangkok, although I had already reached a hypothetical level of proficiency that allowed me to engage with my academic peers in (no doubt deeply flawed) Thai, it was extremely difficult to get ordinary people on the street to respond to me in that language. Given the amount of effort that this middle-aged man had needed to put into learning it, I was understandably annoyed by this lack of response, and would sometimes expostulate, “But I’m speaking to you in Thai” – using a hand gesture that I later came to realize seemed either strange or, indeed, threatening, and that was in fact derived from my Italian experience. (Anthropologists might usefully reflect on the implications of their absorption, not of an entire culture, but – with much greater ease and proficiency than they usually achieve with language, at least in the early stages – of its *incorporated*

aspect. In the event, my expostulatory gesture, which in Italy would have been considered expressive of a normatively theatrical combativeness, did no more good than an explosive complaint. And explosive complaints do absolutely no good at all; the usual Thai response to these is a charming smile of thanks – the most effective way I have ever seen of deflecting anger (without reducing it in the least, by the way – but it is the angry person who ends up suffering the most!).

Discouraged after a summer of repeated blank stares and incomprehension, I returned to the States for three months. When I returned, to my astonishment someone asked me for directions on the street – I think it was my first day back. And almost everyone I talked to responded in Thai. I was elated, but totally astonished – until, one day, a food vendor I knew told a customer who had expressed surprise that “the *farang* speaks Thai,” “He looks Thai too (*duu moean khon thai duay kha*).” In some perplexity I pointed to my face: “I have a *farang* face.” “That doesn’t matter,” the answer came back. “You have Thai gesture (*thatang thai*). And at that moment I suddenly became aware – discursively educated by my vendor friend – that I was trying not to stand over her, was using my hands in a completely different way, and experiencing a certain amount of facial muscle ache because of the greater degree of smiling that Thais seem to practice. I was also vaguely aware, and became much more so in subsequent months, that although – or because – this woman was arguably of lower status than I was, I was hunching myself deferentially as someone who was unsure of his ability to speak properly (the Thai cringe known as *jawng-jawng*) – an appropriate form of courtesy in that I had no desire to play the equally performative role of either the “bandit” (*naklaeng*) or the “aristocrat” (*nai*).

It is perhaps worth noting that at this time I was regularly engaged in some evaluation work for a committee under the Ministry of Research in France. A few months after this epiphany, I had to go to France for some meetings of the group. I was concerned that, now that my Thai felt so much more comfortable, I would suddenly have difficulty with French instead. I need not have worried; French is a language I have spoken fluently since my teens. But I got some strange looks – until I realized that I was *jawng-jawng* in a meeting where such a senior character as myself would be expected to do some haughty lip-pursing, and that I was trying to *wai* when someone gave me a book as a gift. It was the slightly panicked look in this man's eye (I had wondered why he was so rudely handing me the book with his left hand...) that finally got me to pull myself together.

Now I am definitely *not* arguing that I had suddenly become Thai, or that I was speaking Thai particularly well. (This unaccustomed modesty may nevertheless also be a Thai verbal gesture, as is the irony that leads me to show it in the first place.) I do not think that anthropologists easily “go native” simply because I do not believe that there are discrete cultures anyway. I was simply adding another layer to the complex sediments of cultural *habitus* to which my anthropology vagrancy had exposed me and in which they had seasoned me. Rather, in my hunching and scrunching, and in my sudden and totally unaccustomed attacks of deference, I was demonstrating a no doubt amusingly imperfect command of a cultural idiom on which the least educated of my informants and observers (yes, they are observers too!) could confidently pass explicit judgment. I was adapting, not without awkwardness: think of those Greek dances again, though I am told that in my younger days I could do them quite well! And note how my arrogance quotient increases

when I shift the frame of reference from Thailand to Greece – I am now thinking in a different language, as it were.

The key to all this is, I suggest, that anthropologists are always to some extent “off stage and on display” (see Shryock 2004). Gesture, then, is one way in which they do their characteristic task of entering the zone of “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 2005) in a way that signals in public fashion that they are, in fact, privy to intimate secrets, because *a real mastery of the public sphere is demonstrated in the ability to convey messages clearly to those in the know while excluding others without necessarily letting these others realize that this is what is happening*. The anthropologists who act in this way are evidently trying to get their informants to get off the stage and to display all those intimate and slightly disreputable bits of gossip that make good, juicy ethnography. But it is in the nature of fieldwork that one often does not have the opportunity to get one’s informants away from the crowd. Signaling that one is a virtual insider is thus the most effective way of achieving the necessary rapport.

In my Cretan village work, for example, I had made it a matter of principle (and prudence!) to resist my sheep-stealing friends’ attempts to lure me into going raiding with them. But when one especially persuasive character overcame my scruples and I assented, we first went to the coffee-house for some prior refreshment. There, he made me wait on tenterhooks until he had decided the time was ripe – perhaps two hours later! At that point, he made an inquiring gesture with head and hand. I replied – verbally, being that kind of fool! – by asking, “Oh, so we’re ready to go?” He then tossed his head in a contemptuous, silent denial, and we sat for a while longer. When we eventually left and I demanded to know what he had been playing at, he said, “I made a gesture (*noima*)

to you, but you spoke!” Verbally incontinent, I would have made a terrible thief, and put as both at risk. So in this case I failed the test of learning to master the private mode of communication in a public space – where, nevertheless, the fact that almost everyone else is indeed a “cultural intimate” means that the risk of exposure is still very much present and indeed contributes to the masculinity of those embarking on the adventure (see Malaby 2003). The simple public-private opposition fails to capture this complex interweaving that is itself constitutive of social mastery.

But in a more general way most of us can and do learn a basic level of gestural mastery. In that effort, willy-nilly (if we are any good at their job), we start to move and sound like the locals. That does not mean that we have suddenly *become* local, and in some cultures and political camps people actually resent foreigners who learn the language too well – as the Greeks tell me, “You’ve gotten into our uncharted waters.” (The Thais are never likely to tell me that, however frequently I hear – and I do hear – some of them saying again, “He looks Thai!”) Language ideologies (Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998) are part of the story. But why do we call them *language* ideologies? They are, rather, the submerged *culture* ideologies – not those of officialdom, but the ones that constitute what I have called “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 2005). They are the culturally intimate ideologies that people parade – on display, again – in public space. That space is *their* public space; the town square is a collective place of privacy, and now that, as with the *piazza* of so many Italian cities, it is teeming with inquisitive and insensitive tourists, a nod and a wink would give the locals much greater purchase than the rhetorical orotundities for which these squares were originally constructed. It is no coincidence that for at least one anthropologically informed Italian

student of architecture the creation of a public space is itself a form of “gesture” (*gesto*) (Abruzzese 1992: 94).

These public spaces were surely never constructed only for verbal rhetoric and grand oratorical gesticulation. The point of a theatrical space is that the audience is always present, always involved. Those fine declamatory arm-flings must then also be read against the curled lip and raised eyebrow (or their local cultural equivalents) in the audience. And when the waiter comes toward you staring anxiously at his tray instead of nonchalantly dashing through the crowd with the tray balanced on one hand, you know, as a local, that something is wrong, discordant. You see that figure in local costume, speaking the language fluently, not being quite at one with the swelling scene. And you wonder why that other anthropologist, who evidently knows the language, is still not getting very far with it. These are public events too – affirmations that only the locals *really* know. There are, to be sure, ways of entering into that space of collective intimacy; eliciting verbal reactions to what may in a direct sense be verbally inexpressible forms of physical motion, a technique modestly but importantly pioneered by Jane Cowan (1990: 92). But by the point at which ethnographers have gained sufficient rapport with local people to be able to get them to agree to such an exercise in the first place, they have clearly already earned a reputation for some degree of both mastery and intimacy – which in this sense are one and the same thing. The difficult part is to reconstruct the almost insidious process by which they achieved that mastery in the first place. Here, I have attempted to sketch part of that process by reverting to a completely unapologetic anecdotalism – to the narrative gesticulation that, in our verbocentric academic world, is the enabling device for participating in our our peculiar

forms of what we might call “professional intimacy.” These forms are covert, derided, and decidedly “off stage” as far as any public conversation is concerned, as the still-occasionally-rumbling negative reaction to Rabinow’s (1977) exposé of fieldwork makes abundantly clear.

Last scene: back to Rome. For Romans say of their dialect – itself a curious piece of regional rusticity in the capital city of a major economic power – that it is *not* a language, but a way of living; and that this includes a high degree of *gestualità*, of the quality of gesticulation. Mastery over the nuances of language is something people guard jealously as the best protection against the invasion of their cultural intimacy. In Greece, this occurs at the level of the national language, which, at least until the country’s entry into the European Union and the subsequent arrival of thousands of obviously foreign immigrants who were able to learn the language quickly and efficiently, was considered too difficult for foreigners to learn. I myself was assumed either to be a spy or a Greek who was so ashamed of his identity that he did not wish to reveal it – this being in itself a remarkable illustration of the Greek version of the cultural cringe. In Italy, however, a country with a complex pattern of regional identities often at (cultural) war with each other, that level of difficulty is set, not at the level of the national standard language (fluency in which is often regarded as a mark of foreignness rather than of “indigeneity”!). but at the level of the local dialects. Romanesco, in particular, is locally portrayed as impenetrable, not so much for its morphology and lexicon (both of which are close to the national standard), but for all the paralinguistic trappings, gesture included, that invest it with locally salient meanings and a type of humor that is distinctive to the city.

And this is the key point I wish to make: that it is possible, among cultural intimates, to allude to precious and closely guarded cultural secrets in very public places. Rome, as the *caput mundi* in both the religious and tourist senses, is actually an intensely public place, its *piazza* the quintessence of theatrical self-display. But just as secrecy is something that must be performed in public in order for its presence to carry any social weight, as I have noted in another context (Herzfeld forthcoming), so, too, cultural secrets must be bandied about so that outsiders can intuitively grasp their fundamental ungraspability. The public squares of big southern European cities are indeed the spaces of collective self-display. On that same stage, however, people can act in ways that they, and only they, are really able to interpret.

This has important consequences for the practice of ethnography. Many an anthropologist has fallen afoul of the local view that outsiders cannot possibly understand such intimate dimensions of their collective social existence. To some extent, to be sure, they are right. But it is less the mastery of an official language and customs that serves the able anthropologist in seeking cultural knowledge or even aspiring to serve the goals of the population being studied; it is, rather, the ability to demonstrate *obliquely* – through gesture, subtle dialect usage, and quite simply knowing when to shut up – that marks the capable and canny anthropologist and repays that Geertzian wink with something equally resistant to any kind of reductive analysis. And it is the ability to describe such moments that constitutes the greatest challenge for ethnographers today and suggests that, for all their limitations, the new digital technologies may, after all, be able to help us capture the ineffable in mid-flight.



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