

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE POLITICS OF SIGNIFICANCE¹

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By way of a critique of current and populist assumptions about culture that are exemplified in the work of Samuel Huntington (1996), the author examines the marginalization of anthropological research as a symptom of a global "politics of significance". He explores the reasoning behind this situation, which discounts the ordinary, everyday experience that is the proper subject of ethnographic research, which in turn requires the achievement of a high level of intimacy with informants. Herzfeld shows how this work consistently undermines the reified image of "cultures" that constitutes the primary focus of the populist rhetoric he criticizes and analyzes the symbolic bases of the logic, at once teleological and tautological, of the politically dominant worldview that this image represents.

"But let us, ciphers to this great accopt, on your imaginary forces work." So wrote William Shakespeare in the Prologue to *Henry V*, contemplating the enormity of his undertaking: the representation of a great battle in the rather dingy "wooden O" that his contemporaries had built by the banks of the Thames. But the injunction could serve no less persuasively as a motto for the practice of social anthropology, a discipline that may have forsaken – even turned against – its colonialist obsessions with the exotic for its own sake, but that still seeks enlightenment in those ciphers to its great accopt that many dismiss as silly, insignificant, and trivial.

As the sociologist Loic Wacquant has noted (1996), in the U.S. the denigration of all things academic is accompanied by the rise of the "think tank" – institutions that provide powerful government and other agencies, not so much with what they want to know, as with what they want others to perceive as real knowledge. This packaging especially concerns matters of politics and culture – precisely the anthropologist's bailiwick. And yet

¹ An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a Munro Lecture in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh, on 23 January, 1997. I am deeply indebted to my hosts, and to the following for their subsequent comments in the original draft: Fredrik Barth, Daphne Berdahl, Anthony P. Cohen, Arthur M. Kleinman, Sally Falk Moore, and Stanley J. Tambiah. Editors Janice Boddy and Michael Lambek provided rich input at the final stage. I am indebted to James L. Watson for bringing *Anonymous* 1996 to my attention. Some of the ideas expressed here have appeared elsewhere in a more extended form (notably Herzfeld 1987, 1997), but in this essay I attempt to place them in a more critically political context and to suggest the specific nature of the dangers attendant on any significant further marginalization of anthropology. In the special issue of *Social Analysis* in which this article was originally published – 41 (3), November 1997 – the focus was on the concept of culture and its vicissitudes. Taking this theme seriously entailed, specifically, concern with the way in which it seems to have been expropriated by the advocates of a Eurocentric hegemony.

when anthropology is invoked by media commentators and political pundits, it is all too often as the study of peoples too exotic to matter, a salvage operation for the voyeuristic amusement of those who profit most from the processes whereby such peoples, like those who study them, have become marginal to the workings of world power.

And this is the role that anthropologists are expected to play. I was recently approached by the representative of a well-known glossy magazine that reports extensively on foreign cultures. Could I advise my very courteous interlocutor about modern Greek rituals that were genuinely connected to modern Greece? I responded by saying that while there were some that clearly had ancient antecedents, I was uncomfortable with this focus because it implied no awareness of the way in which a conservative elite supported by foreign powers had, for most of the modern Greek state's history, insisted on continuity with the ancient culture of Athens. I became even more uneasy when my interlocutor said she was hoping for something in Athens rather than in the peripheries. And, she insisted, there was no ideological bias here: after all, their interest was almost exclusively in the visual aspects, their photographer was in Greece even as we spoke, so the captions were hardly going to reinforce the ideology of which I was complaining! By this point I had come to realize that there was no basis for communication, and my sense of tragedy lay in the fact that here was someone genuinely enthusiastic about anthropology, who thought that we should happily participate in what Johannes Fabian (1983) has so aptly called "the denial of coevalness" – the denial that we live in the same time-frame as peoples so easily dismissed as "stone age" (New Guinea), "atavistic" (Balkans), "survivals of past glories" (Greece, the Arab world), and so on. Clearly a great educational task lies before us; and, no less clearly, my feeble attempt at tackling that task over the telephone was not about to succeed. Clearly we must rethink our approach, not as an adoption of popularizing tactics, but as a serious challenge *at the popular level* to the damage that these tactics have already wrought – not in the hands of anthropologists, for the most part, but in those of public commentators who have borrowed the language of culture and society in a dangerously uncritical fashion, one that serves rather than challenges the popular stereotypes held by many to support increasingly isolationist positions.

Working in Greece, I have always had to confront these issues in a very practical, everyday fashion. Within Greece I was expected to pronounce on whether "the Greeks were European," a concern that often seemed designed primarily to locate me within the spectrum of cultural politics within which Greeks have long complained of being pariahs, their ancient glory stolen by an ungrateful West – hence all the furore about the Elgin Marbles, for example. Elsewhere I was often assumed to be an archaeologist: the

premise that living people inhabited this land was taken to be secondary. Greece – in some but not all respects like neighboring Turkey – sits uncomfortably astride the boundary between Europe and its barbarian foes. Much of what I thus encountered in the informal moments of my professional engagement with that country comprised attempts to draw cultural boundaries, and these always cut right through the Greeks' sense of their own cultural identity. Neither clearly "Western" nor clearly "Oriental" by the (somewhat inconstant) criteria of the powers that exercise global hegemony, they inhabit the kind of cultural hybrid zone that, while it is increasingly typical of the global condition, is increasingly incompatible with the reductionist model of culture promulgated by the "think tanks" and their spokespersons. Arguments about whether they "are European" or not, although phrased in terms of cultural essences, clearly in practice address strategic access to cultural and political resources, and are a source of great anxiety to many Greeks precisely because of this pragmatic entailment in the play of international power. Greeks themselves often play with stereotypes in an identical fashion: "the Greek," they say, using the authoritative generalization of the singular noun, "is inventive" – or passionate, or unreliable, or brave, according to the particular relevance of these various stereotypes to the needs of the moment. And in a world where cultures have become increasingly reified as essences, as things one "has" (Handler 1985), these attributions are also claims to "sovereignty" (Faubion 1993) – the only ones likely to produce results in a world where other players have already established the scoring rules in this grand game of cultural Monopoly.

Thus, I am emphatically *not* suggesting that we should jump on the latest cultural bandwagons and start preaching about the importance of "culture" in the manner of handbooks designed to help business people "deal" with foreign partners (although these are a fascinating study in their own right) (e.g., Mole 1990). These works, intended as practical guides to exploiting others (who are presumably capable of doing the same thing reciprocally), are at least predicated on the assumed possibility of some degree of transcultural knowledge; but they are certainly part of what I am criticizing here. Far more insidious, however, are the new, Kiplingesque essentializations of cultures as discrete, mutually incompatible entities, for they take the result of the cultural Monopoly game as already established and work to validate that result after the fact. They are deployed in circular fashion as explanations of the failure of cross-cultural communication by those representing the very world forces that possess the power to make it fail in the first place. (There may be a touch of hyperbole here, inasmuch as local agents certainly contribute to these processes; but I want to make the point that the discourse of irremediable otherness is part of the apparatus through which major international forces – individuals and organizations

alike – disguise their own role in creating the disasters the blame for which they then have the sheer power to foist onto other shoulders.) These formulations completely occlude the complex processes of cultural negotiation that would belie their claims to empirical accuracy.

Perhaps the most obvious example of such a position is contained in several influential articles and a major book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, by the political scientist Samuel Huntington (see especially 1993, 1996). In this work, which lays out the reasons for which major civilizations can never find peaceful mutual accommodation, Huntington, like many others, has chosen to reconfigure the culture concept in precisely the terms that anthropologists have spent the last several decades disaggregating into complex and often unstable processes (e.g., Barth 1969; Handler 1985; Moore 1987; Royce 1982). For him, culture is a determinate force. While Huntington treats the “West” as unique in the sense that all cultures are unique, a position that is fully in accord with anthropological understandings (except in its conflation of vast differences under the rubric of “the West”), his insistence on the persistence of “civilizations,” described in terms of cycles of rise and fall, reifies culture and rejects the idea of multicultural society. Such arguments, which translate the logic of *apartheid* and the proto-Nazi concept of blood incompatibility among the races (e.g., Gobineau and Chateau, discussed in Herzfeld 1992: 25) into the apparently more acceptable terms of cultural specificity, ironically also thereby reproduce the authoritarian literalism of the various fundamentalisms, notably the Islamic, that they represent as especially incompatible with Western values. This is not so much a solution as part of the problem, an approach that takes no cultural prisoners – for, in such a view, there is nothing viable for which to exchange them.

The thesis that culture is a determinant of future political realities, while popular in some circles, faces criticism from quarters as different in their habits of thought from anthropologists as are those of Huntington’s persuasion. A skeptical article in *The Economist*, for example, lays out the view that “within the overall mix of what influences people’s behavior, culture’s role may well be declining, rather than rising, squeezed between the greedy expansion of the government on one side, and globalisation on the other” (Anonymous 1996: 26). Certainly, one could say on the evidence of such recent writings that the role of anthropology as a source of insight is being squeezed between the appropriation of its ideas on the one side and the spread of a self-universalizing economism on the other. But work conducted within some of the most determinedly transnational of organizations suggests that in practice cultural differences are both constitutive of what happens *and* themselves massively liable to transformation. The tactic of ethnographic analysis – applied methodically to the European Space Agency, for example (Zabusky 1995: 42) – is necessarily partial, but is indeed the only

effective way of getting “inside practice”; and it is only there that we shall be able to discover, grand pronouncements to the contrary notwithstanding, what the work of culture really is. Zabusky’s findings in the European Space Agency rather dramatically disconfirm both the thesis of a unitary Western culture and the irrelevance of cultural identities and concerns to the effectiveness of a bureaucratic institution.

My own perspective arises from working in Greece, a country that – as my opening vignette should demonstrate – has had to confront the political consequences of being both cast in the role of the spiritual ancestor of Europe and yet tarnished by the long Turkish occupation of Greek lands, and is therefore an especially useful test case for thinking about the significance of “Western civilization” as an analytic construct. The ambiguities of the Greek predicament today feed an extraordinary range of political relationships between the economically dependent Greek nation-state on the one hand and a series of powerful international forces (to some of which it “belongs”, such as the European Union and NATO) – on the other.

Here, predictably, the management of history is both crucial and contentious. There was no unitary Greek nation-state in antiquity on the lines of the modern entity, but that inconvenient fact is elided by the celebration of ancient *Athens* as the ideal model for a modern nation-state that sits astride one of the major fault-lines between the Christian and Islamic worlds and by persistent attempts to represent the ancient religion of Greece as a precursor of modern Christianity *and* secular humanism. If today Greeks are becoming increasingly convinced that Turks and Greeks are constitutionally incapable of getting along together, this is belied both by the experience of working-class citizens of both countries and by a long, if subversive, literary tradition that recognizes the falsity of such a view. Just as ordinary Greeks had previously internalized the confrontation of Islamic East and Christian West as the poles of their own conflicted cultural identity, today they – like the people of Cyprus and Bosnia – are living out the practical consequences of being persuaded into the exclusive logic of national identity. People who would have been regarded as psychopaths a generation earlier are now treated as national heroes, thanks to a national education system manufactured in Athens and determined to allot these people a place alongside Pericles and Leonidas (Loizos 1988). That system, moreover, demands that the language of instruction should be the Greek of Athens, thereby riding roughshod over the fact that most Cypriot Muslims and Christians alike spoke a common language (*jibréika*). That language is itself relegated to the margins of Greek Cypriot history, being dismissed as a “dialect” (and thus as both “archaic” and “peasant” speech) even though it is probably a great deal less comprehensible to most Athenians than the Spanish of Castile is to most Italians. Greek Cypriots increasingly learn to think

of their origins as lying in a vaguely Athenian antiquity, while their present fortunes depend ever more inescapably on a country whose present capital, itself half-Albanian-speaking at the time of the Greek War of Independence, happens to be Athens. A history of reified “civilizations” or “cultures” has no place for the memory of such complexities, and a reading of Tone Bringa’s *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way* (1995), especially in conjunction with the shattering film for which she was principal consultant, *We Are All Neighbours* (Granada Television, *Disappearing World* series), shows us how easily external forces can squeeze them literally out of existence – her documentation of the collapse of civility shows that it had much more to do with forces outside the village than with any ongoing sense of mutual hostility.

The examples of Cyprus and Bosnia show, to be sure, that there are local and national agents of such political incorporation – powerful elites whose interests coincide at various times with those of the stronger global powers. Moreover, local discourse often offers models for making sense of larger conflicts, which thereby begin to color local perceptions in turn: that is, in brief, the process whereby the larger conflicts invade the intimate spaces of local society. Thus, I certainly do not wish to suggest that there are no local templates for conflict; for that would be demonstrably untrue, and would in fact contradict my argument that anthropologists have much to contribute by showing precisely how these templates – kinship conflicts such as feuds, for example – act to filter and reorient perceptions of global confrontation. By the same token, however, I want to argue that the premise of absolute cultural difference, which translates the ephemeral hostility of local conflict into a stable vision of undying hatred and mutual incomprehension, misrepresents cultural identity altogether and translates the complex ebb and flow of social and cultural relations into a crude historical determinism.

Huntington, to be fair, does not treat “civilizations” as unchanging or unresponsive to external influence. Indeed, he is careful to emphasize a developmental pattern that apparently owes much to Spengler and Toynbee (see Mottahedeh 1995: 2). But his invocation of a Braudelian *longue durée* converts historical contingency into an uncomplicated determinism. He shows no interest in the microprocesses through which ideologies and other cosmological systems are both challenged at the local level and yet temporarily – and sometimes permanently – permeate local consciousness. Such penetration of local rhetoric can often create the appearance of a self-fulfilling prophecy, to which theories of this kind then, in a further circularity, lend the gloss of academic legitimation. Of anthropological work he cites none later than the Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) survey of definitions of culture (Huntington 1966: 325, n. 2), failing altogether to engage with recent arguments about the porosity and negotiability of cultural forms or with debates about the roles of social actors in enforcing stereotypes as self-evident truths

and in engendering various forms of everyday resistance to such categorical authority. There is no interest here in what ordinary people do because the action is all presupposed by the monolithic model of “civilizations”. There is not a word about the much-discussed concept of resistance, for example – a concept that, for all its evident weaknesses, recognizes alternatives to the values promulgated by bureaucratic fundamentalists. Diaspora, hybridity, borders – none of this seems to have any relevance in a model that wishes into being precisely the kind of ethnonationalism that it then takes as the key reason for enjoining a systematic, global separation of cultures. Even politicians seem to be little more than predictable ciphers imagined in the homogenizing discourses of nationalism. This comparative sociology of civilizations corresponds in disturbing ways to currently popular stereotypes – *mentalités* for the masses, transmuted here into the instrument of, as well as the public justification for, a desired global policy. This is not to say that the public is necessarily ill-informed. On the contrary, one suspects that the excessive literalization of popular stereotypes in an academic text subverts the kinds of everyday uses of these stereotypes that anthropologists are able to observe in the course of fieldwork. These uses may be ironic, disruptive, or creative in a variety of ways. In the new cultural scientism represented by Huntington and others, these uses are submerged in an argument that mistakes form for meaning. And we should surely be concerned they may in turn have the power, through processes of authoritative legitimation, to persuade large segments of the public to accept a more literal reading of the stereotypes and so to surrender to the alluring intellectual ease of “national consensus”. At that point arguments for a “clash of civilizations” have fulfilled their own predictions and the battle lines are drawn. An anthropologist must insist on the search for more responsible alternatives.

Form is unquestionably important, for it furnishes the image of homogeneity to which nationalists seek to reduce internal difference. In the absence of the intimate social relations of the local community, the state must create an *intimacy of cultural form* – a sense that all the members of the nation can infallibly recognize their shared diagnostic traits in each other. This is one reason why race, visual marker that it is, often plays a role out of all proportion to its alleged capacity to affect culture genetically – a capacity that has in any case never been demonstrated. Evocations of common tradition, language, and religious practice are, similarly, all attempts to model as culture the political desideratum of conformity. Such processes can have a breathtakingly persuasive effect because they create the ideal conditions for their own success: the erasure of regional difference becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of national unity (see, e.g., Appadurai 1988).

Huntington does not fall into the trap of supposing that people of different cultures can never learn from each other, and he also recognizes

both that the “Other” cannot be reduced to a single description and that the triumph of the “West” is neither inevitable nor necessarily irreversible (Huntington 1996: 33). Thus far there is nothing in his argument that an anthropologist would find particularly problematic; indeed, thus far his argument offers an attractively open alternative to the culture-bound logic of rational-choice theories. These positive features must be emphasized because they rhetorically produce an air of reasonableness and of a principled opposition to dogma – dogma being, in this schema, the hallmark about what is different about virtually all non-Western cultures. And it is this stage in the argument that seems, from an anthropological point of view, both poorly informed and remarkably dated. In effect Huntington proposes an evolutionary schema that resuscitates Victorian anthropology in a neo-Liberal guise:

Conceivably modernization and human moral development produced by greater education, awareness, and understanding of human society and its natural environment [*sic*] produce sustained movement toward higher and higher levels of Civilization. Alternatively, levels of Civilization may simply [*sic*] reflect phases in the evolution of civilizations (Huntington 1996: 320).

But who is to judge those levels? Who will hear the voices of those marginalized by this brutal march of progress? Behind the benign assurances of respect for others and even the apparent openness to a search for civilizational commonalities lies the assumption that “we” shall recognize those moments of great opportunity. That, presumably, is because – as it was for the Victorians – our “greater... understanding of human society and its natural environment” will legitimize a hierarchy of values. We are told that “scholars easily identify highpoints and lowpoints in the level of Civilization in the histories of civilizations,” these being determined by an absolute, if minimal, morality that all “civilizations” share (1996: 320). But which scholars? Given that most anthropologists would decry both the terminology and the conclusion, one must wonder what kind of authority is being claimed here. Certainly, it is one that marginalizes both anthropology and its preoccupations.

Empirically, moreover, the argument does not work at the level of everyday social experience. Ordinary people may not read the rules of cultural specificity in exactly the way their leaders intend. We often find that the more rigidly defined moral codes are precisely those which permit the greatest level of manipulation, precisely because the illusion of pure reference serves as an effective rhetorical disguise for self-interest: even (or especially) if we can agree on a “shared value” of “honor”, that does not necessarily mean that we must agree through our actions about what such a value entails. Moreover, the leaders of nation-states – intellectuals included

– are also “ordinary people”, imbued with the cultural values to which they in turn must calibrate their rhetoric. Here my argument may at first seem to support Huntington’s view that culture determines actions and their interpretation. But this reading overlooks the *negotiability of meaning* in culture. The persistence of form can even be a mask for greater, not lesser, change and variability in significance, as I have just noted. And the permanence of form is also an illusion born of human beings’ classificatory proclivities: social structures, for example, do “exist”, but only in the sense that they are emergent in actions that are themselves never entirely predictable. They are performed, *deformed*, in a “social poetics” that ensures their constant capacity to change. Indeed, the more rigid the code, the more reassuringly a social actor can appear to guarantee continuity while actually bending the rules to new uses. Those who invoke the common good or the power of the state to advance their own interests know this: only when they are caught and charged with the symbolic taint of “corruption,” required for such cases by our current, rationalist symbolism of power, does the malleability of a fixed code become temporarily and frighteningly apparent.

This is why political leaders, and political analysts as well, must always master the moral classification currently in vogue. In that sense, Huntington’s thesis acknowledges the importance of showing respect for “other” cultures. It is his talk of evolution that betrays the kinship of his analytic mode to the current way of conducting political business in the West. Although to his credit Huntington explicitly rejects the criterion of race (1996:42), and although he is at pains to distinguish between modernization and Westernization (1996: 78), his argument is no less essentialist for all that. It requires an acknowledgment that transcendent ideas are more important than social acts, and ignores the discomfiting circumstance that all ideas are necessarily only knowable through their embodiment *in* social acts. Even the enunciation of a seemingly abstract value is such an act. Authority often consists in the capacity to disguise that contingency.

In fact the line separating those in authority from the people they lead may often not be very clear. The “think tanks” may, as Wacquant (1996) suggests, pander to the powerful; but the powerful, and perhaps many of those who endow their sentiments with the gloss of academic respectability, can only retain their power to the extent that their rhetoric successfully captures the current version of eternal and self-evident truth: tautology as teleology (see also Herzfeld 1992: 149). This exploitation of popular values, whether as explicit anti-Semitism (as Goldhagen [1996] has so controversially argued) or as a more generalized ideology of “Aryan” purity of the blood (Mosse 1985), powerfully sustained the appeal of Nazism. (Not coincidentally, it also underlay the rise of neo-Classicism [Bernal 1987:31-33 *et passim*], with consequences for modern Greece that are arguably even more interest-

ing for understanding the global implications of cultural hierarchy than are the U.S.-focussed arguments for and against multiculturalism and Afrocentrism.) Are we going to conclude from this that German culture is *necessarily* anti-Semitic, as Goldhagen has been charged with arguing? Are we to suppose that the Greeks must accept others' characterization of them as degenerate throwbacks to the Europeans' collective ancestors?

In fact I do not subscribe to the idea that people are dupes of ideology or the prisoners of cultural determinism. On the other hand, we must recognize that clever leaders can transform the boundaries of ordinary social identity – most prominently those of kinship (see, e.g., Borneman 1992; Yanagisako and Delaney 1995) – into persuasive boundaries of a much more massive and destructive kind, notably those of puristic forms of nationalism. And when the agents of that transformation operate from outside its immediate cultural and social context, as in the former Yugoslavia, they can all too easily create the conditions under which their warnings about the mutual incompatibility of populations become entirely self-fulfilling. Greeks and Turks on Crete and Cyprus have become infinitely more “incompatible” since their respective “parent” nations – that kinship metaphor again! – decided that this incompatibility was inevitable, a development that was also encouraged by the continuing postcolonial interference of other, larger powers. Much the same can be said about Muslim-Jewish relations in the Middle East; even now, as Mottahedeh notes (1995: 4) in a comparison of the cases of the Muslim Arafat with the Christian Habash, religion is – at best – no more reliable a predictor of attitude than ethnic affiliation, but this has not prevented the hardening of media typifications of “Muslims” as opposed to “Christians.” Anthropological theory today does not sustain the image of ethnic spontaneous combustion. Human agents – insiders or outsiders – must light the fire, having first rendered the materials inflammable for motives that are not culturally predetermined – but that may hide behind a pretext of “culture” (or even of a “clash of civilizations”).

Anthropologists employ a methodology of close and above all *intimate* observation of social life that is quite unlike what most of their colleagues in the other social sciences do. It is grounded in what they rather picturesquely call fieldwork, where the success of the venture depends on our ability to achieve a measure of closeness with the people we study. (Indeed, this is partly why kinship – the social organization of intimacy – has been so important in the discipline, and why, as a result, anthropologists have evinced such a lively – *and informed* – interest in its expropriation by a variety of nationalisms.) It is when we convert the social intimacies of that experience into the observation of *cultural intimacy* – the private spaces of national and other large-scale entities – that we collide simultaneously with nationalist defensiveness and scientific thinking, because the observations

that emerge do not sustain those twin determinisms of state and predictive model. The parallel between the two determinisms, moreover, is far from accidental: the scorn that our allegedly “anecdotal” methodology can conjure up in an audience trained to believe in opinion polls and market surveys is one of the means by which racist and nationalist ideologies keep the prying of the anthropologists at bay. What looks like the attractive face of the discipline – its commitment to the study of “real people” – can be very threatening to those who understand that it is the intimate spaces of everyday life that also, when revealed, show up the disjunctures between everyday social experience and official diction.

A curious aspect of this situation is the fact that, because anthropologists deal with both the everyday and (frequently) the exotic, their concerns often seem esoteric as well as trivial. But since their concerns are with the intimate spaces of cultural and social existence, what this means in practice is that people can apparently be persuaded to dismiss what is most central to their daily lives as unimportant. Note again a key reason for the usefulness of the Greek experience in flushing out this insidious perception: the Greeks, told that everything “Turkish” was inferior, found themselves acceding to a rhetoric in which the most intimate aspects of their daily lives – many of which were known by words of Turkish origin – were the marks of their marginality and inferiority! This is the same logic that upholds the West over the rest of the world, formal categories over social experience, and, by extension, think-tank generalizations over the inconvenient messiness of a world in which cultures are *not* static, clearly bounded, and eternal.

Can we really accept a view of reality that treats daily experience as marginal? Certainly its own concern with non-Western cultures opens it to charges of being concerned with matters outside of what is quaintly known as the “real world.” Initiation rituals, food taboos, kinship rules, and peripheral tribal peoples are somehow excluded from this reality. No matter that the Soviets had their massive rituals (Binns 1980), nationalism plays on themes of kinship as a rallying cry (Delaney 1995; Herzfeld 1997), or that the peculiar angle of vision offered by anthropology can as easily defamiliarize modern industrial culture (e.g., Miner 1965) and international scientific cooperation (Zabusky 1995) as it can familiarize its audience with far-flung exotica: these resemblances are, we are told, “*mere* metaphors” – as though scientific models and bureaucratic rationales did not depend on such things.

The marginalization of anthropological perspectives, however, is a symptom of changing social dynamics. If it is true that television viewers see more ethnographic film than twenty years ago, the key question concerns the politics of representation: does the portrayal of an exotic people (or, conversely, of a creolized culture exhibiting a virtual caricature of “our” culture)

advance the cause of mutual understanding, or subvert it? The Canadian anthropologist Marta Rohatynskij (1997) describes an important shift that occurred among the Papua New Guinea people she studied, the Ömie, both in their self-perception and in her relationship with them. As the Ömie increasingly found their tiny and politically weak culture absorbed into a larger nation-state structure, once-distinctive social features (in their case what Rohatynskij calls “sex affiliation”) disappeared. At the same time, the anthropologist has come no longer to enjoy uniquely privileged access to the description of culture, which has become a major preserve of the bureaucrats of the young nation-state concerned – just as European nationalists were in the 18th and 19th centuries – to create “unity in diversity” by identifying transcendent and reifiable features of a *national* culture. While some anthropologists find themselves drawn into nationalistic culture-building projects, moreover, others are mocked or even castigated for daring to preserve the artificial barrier that tradition poses to development and modernity. Many anthropologists thus find themselves either co-opted or excluded. The idea of a dispassionate perspective seems unworkable.

Rohatynskij lucidly argues that the growing marginalization of many of the peripheralized societies studied by anthropologists is accompanied by an increasing marginalization of the anthropologists themselves, who find themselves engaged willy-nilly in the efforts of superordinate entities – such as new nation-states and the revolutionary movements that often precede them – to reify fluid identities as political realities and to absorb any smaller entity that inconveniently threatens their boundaries. Rohatynskij’s point is essentially that the same forces that pressure small groups to assimilate are also those that render marginal the concerns of anthropologists who have traditionally studied small, out-of-the-way societies, many of which have now themselves become either assimilated or radically peripheral. The tale she tells is thus an exemplary illustration of the current dilemma.

The sequence she relates is also one that has happened before. Ironically, much the same story can be told about the refashioning of Europe itself in the 19th and 20th centuries. The Greek denial of the existence of ethnic minorities, official policy that is widely supported among the overwhelming majority population of Greek-speaking, Orthodox Christians, is a case in point: Greek friends who persist in pointing out that “even if such people do exist (and yes, Michael, we know they do, really), *must* we talk about it in public?” *ipso facto* confirm the argument I am making here, and also, and concomitantly, shows once again that the Greek case illustrates in direct fashion the more general consequences of the West’s global hegemony: the anger against anthropologists is often expressed as irritation that they should address such minor matters (“there are so few of

these people!”). While there are intellectuals who oppose these popular positions with consistency and courage, they do not represent the current idiom of public discussion. It is more convenient to accept the official line.

Note, too, that in invoking the work of people like Marta Rohatynskij and Jean Jackson (who has discussed the importance of understanding forms of self-essentialization among Tukanoan peoples as a necessary means of defense against overwhelming cultural encroachment) (Jackson 1995), I am directly comparing a modern European nation-state with Papua New Guinea and the Tukanoans – a commonplace for anthropologists, especially for those, now a growing proportion of the profession, for whom European societies are a legitimate object of ethnographic research, but hardly a tactful move in the still racist and colonialist management of cultural capital at the level of international relations.²

This is not to say that anthropology has no currency among, for example, middle-class North Americans or Western Europeans. But the question concerns what *kind* of anthropology garners some degree of public recognition. The short answer is that anthropology becomes popular when it legitimates existing prejudices rather than attacking them. That, I suggest, is why in the ideologically antisocial post-Thatcher and post-Reagan era, archaeology has so much more appeal than social anthropology. Whereas social and cultural anthropologists deal with distant places or cause deep offense when their work comes closer to home, archaeologists can work anywhere in the world without having to engage with “the natives” at all. And where social and cultural anthropologists emphasize both collective action and its instability and often threaten the cultural intimacy of the powerful (because their point of entry is through the *social* intimacy they achieve with the disenfranchised and the weak), archaeologists commonly monumentalize. Social and cultural anthropologists, for example, are often criticized by members of dominant majority populations for their close attention to marginal and minority groups said not to be “typical” of the country as a whole. By contrast, archaeologists, whose work is expensive and often collaborative, are more often drafted into the service of powerful ideologies even when these are themselves far from uniform (e.g., Abu El-Haj 1998; Dietler 1994). Archaeology often also profits from the fallacy of misplaced concreteness: it appears to lend fixity to irredentist claims of unchanging cultural form: monuments are infinitely more durable than social values or kinship arrangements, and they thus appear to anchor common sense in material sensation. Thus,

² Such comparisons are ever offensive to those who see themselves as civilized. A graduate student of mine, recently interviewed by a Russian language specialist for a fellowship examination, was told (a) that Russians would resent being studied as “barbarians”, and (b) that while anthropologists’ interest in nonlinguistic matters was all very well, it was, well, trivial in comparison to the centrality of language. As he said, with no apologies to Clifford Geertz (1973): “A wink may be important, but it’s only a wink.”

archaeology legitimates; social anthropology, all too often, embarrasses.

Part of that embarrassment lies in the distorting-mirror effect of anthropological research – the easily derided claims of resemblance between “their” practices and “ours.” Yet such similarities are far-reaching in their implications. Let me offer a case in point from my own fieldwork among Cretan shepherds, who were engaged in dramatic displays of masculine competitiveness – especially through conspicuous meat-eating (which in the most remarkable cases took the form of consuming raw fat) and the endemic practice of reciprocal animal-theft. These men regard the objects of their competition, whether sheep or the cards they slam down at each other in leisure-time games, as analogous to women. The sheer unfamiliarity of such actions encourages the anthropologist to unpack its symbolism: precisely because it is so different, it challenges our capacity for gaining access to alien forms of meaning. Yet once we have come to perceive it as a discourse about gender inequality, and as a metaphor for other kinds of inequality including the political marginality of these rather lawless shepherds themselves, it turns out to be discomfitingly familiar after all.

Indeed, it is part of the stock-in-trade of American caricatures, which must be fairly general for the public to understand them. I am thinking here of the figure of the hill-billy. This figure easily becomes an object of fun: he is the marginal within, “not us”. Thus, he appears in the comic strip figure of Snuffy Smith (Fred Lasswell, syndicated by King Features/Bloomington *Herald-Times*) as a merely trivial aspect of American life, a caricature who in real life inhabits only a “space at the side of the road” (Stewart 1996). I borrow that phrase from Kathleen Stewart’s evocative ethnography of Appalachian life in part because her own juxtaposition of academic with hill-billy talk makes precisely the point I want to emphasize: that mereness is not a matter of essence but of attribution – and thus of the power to attribute. Snuffy Smith is “safe”: he poses little risk of serious identification such as would have to be faced were the focus to lie instead on law professor Anita Hill’s allegations of sexual harassment against Clarence Thomas during the latter’s nomination hearings for appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court, or on recent revelations of massive sexual misconduct in the U.S. military. And yet every North American who turns out for a barbecue – *pastoral animal meat* roasted by *men* in the *open air* while the *women* prepare *boiled and sweetened vegetable dishes and cold salads* in the domestic space of the *kitchen* – participates in the same symbolic forms. These forms may indeed even share a common symbolic etymology, rendered all the less accessible because it is not rendered verbally explicit and because it seems so ordinary. But – and this is what critics of anthropological preoccupations often forget – what is ordinary is also, *ipso facto*, pervasive.

I deliberately use an example of what superficially seems to be surpassing triviality, but one that also has links to particularly dire forms of

social experience, to make a key point: that the routinization of power structures is at its most effective when we laugh at its intimations. When Hitler first appeared on the German political scene, many laughed at him and treated him as an inconsequential buffoon, yet it is clear now that he was able to appeal to core values in German society that are shared with many other European and other cultures. These consist not only in explicit anti-Semitism, which – without the symbolic framing that the Nazis provided – might well have remained socially unpalatable: bigotry requires conventional classificatory rules to furnish it with a socially acceptable “justification”. No less important than the specific mythology of anti-Semitic libels, then, is the set of ideas about blood, still enshrined in German law (Linke 1986; Soysal 1994; see also Borneman 1992), that renders the large prejudices domestically familiar, commonsensical, and immune to the corrosion of doubt.

This is not to essentialize Germans as incurable beasts, thereby reproducing the racist essentialism of the Nazis, but, on the contrary, to argue that the manipulation of symbolic values by specific political *agents* can transmute the most inclusive-seeming social values into appalling brutality (see especially Kapferer 1988: 212-216; Kapferer 1996: 30-34; Tambiah 1996: 335), *Gemütlichkeit* into genocide, even – as Rabinowitz (1997: 82-100) lucidly shows for the stance of Israeli Jews *vis-à-vis* their Arab neighbours in Nazareth – liberalism into bigotry.

Thus, whatever the sources of habitual action, it is its very ordinariness that makes it such an object of critical interest for the anthropologist – and this in turn often exposes the anthropologist to ridicule. Yet it is in that ordinariness that we find the seeds of the dramatic, which pursues to an extreme the process of *deformation* whereby all cultural forms are brought to consciousness. The rhetoric shared by George Bush and Saddam Hussein at the height of the Gulf War was not so far removed from what I heard from the Cretan sheep-thieves. Bush had his barbecues, Hussein his agnatic clan feuds – and the masculinist bellicosity of their exchanges was surely readily comprehensible to their respective domestic audiences. True, their conduct of domestic politics differed in style and degree of violence, but this only serves to make the common elements in their fulminations all the more significant – once we take the necessary first step of accepting that such a comparison is possible at all. And that step moves us far down the road that leads away from essentializing discourses about clashes of civilization. These clashes happen precisely because, as in any communication system, the actors share common ground.

Of marginalities

Having suggested something of what others find either embarrassing or sim-

ply laughable in the preoccupations of social and cultural anthropologists, I now return to the specific topic of anthropology and its oft-alleged marginality. I wish to make five interlinked points in particular: (1) attributions of marginality are political acts and must be understood as such, especially when applied to the academic world; (2) social anthropology is a diagnostic case because of its extreme marginality within the academy, which perhaps also reflects the larger marginality of its typical subjects; (3) this can be turned around to ask pertinent questions about the politics of significance – think of the way Vico took the legitimating science of etymology and used it to *destabilize* the rhetoric of state power and to expose “civic disability” (Struever 1983); and (4) one of the best ways of doing it, though by no means the only one, is at the sites of extreme marginality within the so-called “Western world.” One can situate the marginalization of anthropology’s concerns within the larger political context of what is actually going on at the centres of power.³

I would like to add the fifth point in the form of a logical coda: that (5) the marginalization of any form of symbolic activity in anthropological research – the difficulty of persuading one’s colleagues, let alone non-anthropologists, of the instrumental capacity of language (and indeed of all semiotic systems) in the constitution of social relations – is a product of a politics of significance in which something called “rationality” is taken to be outside culture. *This* is the collective culture of the politically dominant against which the anthropologist must constantly work if it is not to remain, as Rosaldo (1989: 198-204) describes it, “invisible.” It possesses the quality of “unmarkedness” that Urciuoli (1996: 38) has expanded from Roman Jakobson’s more narrowly linguistic formulation (on which, see Waugh 1980: 74). In the semiotics of cultural interaction, social actors vie for whatever cultural capital may render their agency invisible, and therefore immune to censure. In so doing, they produce precisely the kind of homogenizing effect that renders *their* culture invisible and as at best liable to only the most glacial forms of change. It is vital that our analyses should not reproduce, but should instead unveil, these processes of cultural hegemony. We all use language: it is naturalized as the very basis of common sense and rationality, and its role in constituting that sense of rationality is banished to the background. *Mutatis mutandis*, much the same can be said about other symbolic media, such as architecture, dress, manners, and so on – the everyday encodings of cultural hierarchies. Because anthropologists often attend carefully to these encodings, they are precariously liable to the charge of overinterpretation (and, let it be said, may often be guilty of it too – but that

³ Some readers may recognize here the tactic that I employed in *Anthropology through the Looking-Glass* (Herzfeld 1987). The difference is that this time I am less interested in speaking specifically about the ethnography of Greece in particular, and am instead more concerned with the marginality of anthropology itself and with what this portends.

does not invalidate their central preoccupation).

Another elusive cultural good, like “symbolism” a sign of marginality within the dominant political idiom of modernising, is “tradition.” Nation-state bureaucracies cherish tradition, nurture it, and so control it as far as they are able. In consequence, the pedestal on which these guardians of relevance place tradition is, like Wittgenstein’s duck that becomes a rabbit when it is turned upside-down, instantly convertible into something else: a tethering-post that restricts the power of its bearers. Jane Nadel-Klein (1991), writing about British “localism” (with particular reference to Scotland), has made a very similar point. (Another way of talking about tradition is to use the “mentality” concept, about which the best that can be said is that it is extremely useful in the cultural *diagnostics* I am describing: those who apply it to whole populations – Greeks, Africans, criminals, minorities, women, the young – would be the most offended at the suggestion that they could in any sense be so characterized: mentality, like culture, is always something *others* have.)

Attributions of marginality, acts of “marking” others, are political. As Malkki (1995: 7-8) observes, following but also expanding the position enunciated by Mary Douglas (1966; see also Herzfeld 1992: 37-8), this is more than simply a question of the way in which systems of classification define anomaly as “matter out of place” and hence as symbolically polluting (“dirt”) since those who are so defined may fight back, as social actors, with their own definitions of appropriate social value. Several recent ethnographies (Stewart 1996; for Indonesia, for example, see George 1996; Steedly 1993; Tsing 1993) have explored the ways in which the pervasive presence of the state even in societies far removed from the centres of power leads both to state indifference and/or persecution and to self-definition as an alternative morality; my sheep-stealing Cretan friends similarly find themselves marginalized and persecuted by a state they consider to be morally corrupt in part because they relate to it as clients to a set of patrons. The state treats such marginalized populations as “traditional” and “ancestral” (see Danforth 1984) and constitutes them as atypical of – and marginal to – the state’s own projects of modernity, often castigating those anthropologists who have the temerity to spend much time on these embarrassing reminders of alternative social orders. We might note that, at the level of epistemology, the refusal of cultural hybridity is a central tenet of Huntington’s thesis, which, like the civilizational structures it recognizes, abhors the anomaly of mixed categories.

Anthropology is a diagnostic case. Here the dismissal of our methods as merely anecdotal is especially revealing. Criticisms of Anastasia Karakasidou’s work on the hellenization of Greek Macedonia, for example, invoke positivistic criteria of evidence that overlook the *intensity* as well as the *intimacy* of field research (see Zachariadis 1994; cf. Karakasidou 1994). She

had discussed in conference presentations and publications the gradual homogenization of the population as linguistically Greek and religiously Greek Orthodox, and had in the process attracted the ire of both some members of the Greek and Greek-American right-wing fringe and certain officials. Questions were raised by both these groups about the accuracy of her scholarship, and the idea that her intimate acquaintance with the population in question might provide a critical perspective on politically sensitive statistics proved deeply disturbing to those who espoused the official position that the local population of Macedonia had been uninterruptedly Greek in culture, spiritual character, and self-ascription. The response entailed accusing Karakasidou of a form of anecdotalism and of being unscientific in her methodology. In the event, it proved to be a remarkably clear demonstration of the parallels between scientism and certain forms of nationalism.

Accusations of poor science are a popular move with nonacademics, on whom the rhetoric of scientism has long since worked its alchemy. Even for those who might be more skeptical, the spectacle of academics belabouring academics with poor science supports the anti-intellectualism that so much recent Eurocentrism has seemed to support. We see here, clearly deployed as political strategy rhetorical claims about what is “scientific.” These claims are far from inconsequential. Thus, for example, Cambridge University Press refused to publish Karakasidou’s book despite enthusiastic readers’ reports on the grounds – never substantiated, and deeply offensive to many Greeks because of their Orientalist implications of irrationality – that publication would put the Press’s Athens staff at risk from possibly violent public reaction. No threat was ever actually made against the Press, and Karakasidou herself, who had been threatened by extremists at an earlier stage, enjoyed the full protection of the Greek authorities when she returned home (see Gudeman and Herzfeld 1996). The resulting furore produced evidence that the scientific critique of Karakasidou’s work offered a kind of respectability to those who were offended by her findings. Thus, in the Greek English-language monthly *Odyssey*, a letter-writer attacked my defence of Karakasidou’s refusal to name her informants as evidence of a lack of science: “If anthropological research lacks documentation and there cannot be examination and verification of the facts presented, then it cannot be considered a work of science, only a work of fiction” (Argyropoulos 1996). This misrepresentation of a very carefully documented study, in which only the personal names of informants were withheld, nicely unites the scientific with the nationalistic, showing how much claims of fact, resting on the rhetoric (rather than the substance) of documentation, belong in the armoury of nationalism. If anthropology can be dismissed as unscientific because the informants (like those interviewed by journalists) must be protected from possible reprisals, then the position of those who might carry out the repris-

als in unassailable, both literally and metaphorically.

Symbolism and rhetoric are hardly epiphenomenal to political reality. That they are, however, is precisely the claim that those who have most to gain from manipulating these symbols *must* make if they are to be successful in concealing their own agendas. But if scholars wish to treat the study of peripheral populations as epiphenomenal to the “real” nation-state and its culture, they should not object if these same anthropologists then turn their attention to the scholars themselves as being representative of their culture.

The criticism that anthropological work is itself of marginal importance is central to both the nationalistic and the scientific agendas. Anthropologists are used to attacks on their work as a waste of taxpayers’ money. In the U.S., Sherry Ortner once received the “Golden Fleece” award from Sen. Proxmire for her study of Sherpa mountaineering, while the *National Enquirer* attacked the National Endowment for Humanities for funding a “ridiculous” conference (organized by Steven Feld) on lamenting: “You’ll Weep When You Read How Govt. Blew Your Tax \$\$”, said the all-too-predictable headline (Barr 1990), while an official of the National Taxpayers’ Union was quoted as saying, “This is outrageous – spending U.S. taxpayer funds on a get-together of obscure academics who want to chat about what primitive people do when they get bummed out or depressed!”

Of course, one could argue that this did not appear in a particularly serious publication. But anthropologists must resist the temptation to enter that particular mode of argument for it is itself a version of the politics of significance and to reject it as trivial would be to reject the evidence of the everyday as significant for our understanding of political process. Representativeness, moreover, is a statistical matter; and, if statistical representativeness is to be viewed as a substantive issue of methodology, it would be hard to claim that the attitude described in the *National Enquirer* article is unrepresentative of the wider cultural context, or that it does not articulate with both Congressional objections to tax support for the arts and humanities and the virulently anti-statist militias’ evocation of “no taxation without representation.” The circulation of the *National Enquirer* – an indisputably statistical measure – indeed suggests that it represents a significant segment of public sentiment.

Indeed, the recent rapid spread and increased visibility of the militias indicates, precisely because it represents an extreme case, that such anti-intellectual attitudes are common. This presents the authority of the federal nation-state with a problem. Grounding the authority of a sovereign nation-state in rebellion, as every modern nation-state from the United States to Greece and to Somalia has discovered, creates a systemic instability that can be most fully identified at the margins where the practical authority of the

state is at its weakest. This is the crucial argument for studying Cretan sheep-thieves, Bedouin camel raiders, Indonesian headhunters, and rugged individualists in the American frontier badlands. Yet it is precisely here that we meet the greatest resistance to anthropology. Just as Athenians have objected to being viewed as “natives,” and insist that Cretan sheep-thieves are marginal to “their” society, so too the idea that legislators and law enforcement officers share any common cultural ground with either their internal foes or the nation’s enemy sounds like a mixture of treason and blasphemy. But how could matters be otherwise? If we really want to know something about “our” culture (or “civilization”), we should not pre-emptively decide where its center and margins lie.

Thus, the solution is not to conduct field research only in the cities; but nor is it to conduct it only among the peasants. Saying, for example, that since the majority of Greeks now live in cities only urban life represents their essential selves is not only remarkably like the essentialism of the nationalists, it also replicates the rhetoric whereby anthropological research is itself dismissed and denigrated. The point is not to show the elite how odd and exotic (or unworthy of study) the rural peasants are, but to remind the elite that its own values are very much of a piece with those of the same peasantry. The outraged reaction in Greece to James Faubion’s *Modern Greek Lessons* (1993; see Pezmazoglou 1994) – which committed the double solecism of suggesting that Greek modernity was not that of the rest of Europe, and that the self-regard of intellectuals was that of the peasants – really proves his point: why the outrage, if he is not right on the mark? Although his book – in which homosexuality, literary debate, and reflexive theorizing play prominent roles – seems to mark a decisively postmodern break with the conventions of Greek ethnography, its message is in fact strongly like that of Renée Hirschon’s more obviously orthodox *Heirs of the Greek Catastrophe* (1989), also a study of urban life. Both suggest that there is something distinctive about urban Greek life, and that the sources of this similarity are to be sought in rural Greek society, so that ultimately the break between urban and rural – like the distinction between official and folk religion so effectively debunked by Charles Stewart (1989) – is to be found in the rhetoric of relative power. It is not a description of the actual conditions of life in Greece, but, *quâ* rhetoric, one of those conditions itself, the instrument of one side in the tussle for significance. Difference, however, implies hierarchy; the use of a common framework in order to treat folk and ecclesiastical religion, or bureaucracy and ritual, or magic and science, would elide “distinction” (Bourdieu 1984) and thereby undercut the symbolic capital of power. This is not to argue, for example, that bureaucracy is necessarily (or “merely”) a symbolic mask for abuse, but to make the point that individual social actors may abuse the trappings of officialdom precisely because they have

achieved mastery over that symbolism and know how to deploy it for their own purposes. Bureaucrats claim cultural transcendence (as “rationality”) and social independence (as a rejection of “corruption”, surely one of the most blatantly symbolic images ever to claim objective, abstract meaning).

Here it would be useful to recapitulate a central theme of my argument. Cultural judgment, being necessarily political, often reveals parallels between academic and nationalist thought. Thus, for example, we may profitably compare the conflated vision of culture found in such arguments as Huntington’s with the imploded version used by Greeks of the political right who, desirous of establishing the European character of their national culture, decry all that is most intimate in their culture as Turkish or Slavic in origin, *therefore* as foreign, and *therefore* as irrelevant to a country now splendidly entering “Europe” in the political sense – that is, the European Community. Among these items is the whole gamut of phenomena studied by anthropologists – local inheritance practices, minority identities, the conduct and mediation of violence, feuding, and, yes, animal-theft. The irrelevance to national identity of these peripheral topics is “proved,” in unanswerably circular fashion, by their inappropriateness to the country’s European pretensions.

I have recently responded (Herzfeld 1997: 98-105) to the critiques of anthropological research offered by certain establishment figures in Greece whose main preoccupation is to demonstrate the European character of that country (notably Kozyris 1993). Their argument is easily summarized: that, at the moment when Greece is fully entering the EU, these preoccupations – notably with peripheral “customs” and officially non-existent minority groups – are dangerous to the country’s international interests because such picturesque images undermine its self-presentation as quintessentially, indeed originarily, European. As I pointed out in my response, the irony is that this defensive posture is probably the best indication of the reality of the phenomena thus decried. But it is also important to note that the Greek nationalist argument bears a striking resemblance to Huntington’s thesis, except that, for Huntington, Greece is not really part of “the West” because its religious traditions have placed it in another camp.

Now it is not the main point of this paper to attempt to demolish Huntington’s argument. His position is a symptom, not a cause, of the problem to which I address this discussion, and others have already more comprehensively dealt with its weakness on empirical grounds – notably Mottahedeh (1995), who points out that Huntington’s treatment of the Middle East is inaccurate in its characterisation of Islam and unconvincing in its generalisation of specific cases. But it is precisely the resemblance of his argument to that of élite Greek conservatives that I find arresting, for this parallelism demonstrates the force of Mottahedeh’s observation that the

Huntington thesis risks “feed[ing] fantasies already too prevalent about a massive coordinated Islamic movement that sees as its primary objective the humiliation of the West” (Mottahedeh 1995: 13) – and, one might add, about similar conspiracies elsewhere in the world. Political forces in the West, including pro-Western elements in Greece and Turkey (as Huntington himself makes clear [1996: 144-9]), are situating themselves, as social agents, on the same side of this particular culture war as Huntington. Even the Greek drift away from the West and toward an alliance of Orthodox Christians – with some attempt to forge closer links with Serbia and Russia especially – is only a partial reaction, and derives in part from the Greek electorate’s disenchantment with the *political*, not cultural, influence of the United States and the European Union. (One might add that the impact of the Christian Coalition on U.S. politics offers a similar spectacle of disaffection from the processes of rationalist democracy: yet Huntington would hardly claim that the Coalition’s supporters were irrelevant to the U.S. political scene.) For if the Greeks have a grievance against the West, it is precisely that the West has been politically, economically, and militarily ungrateful for that great gift of “civilization” with the consequences of which, in the form of the status of civilizational frontier, it has burdened Greece. Greek conservatives will thus welcome Huntington’s anti-multicultural argument for the same reasons for which they reject Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* (1987): too much depends on their continuing ability to play the role of the autochthonous founders of civilization. The Neo-Orthodox movement, by contrast, feeds on the obvious failures of this policy of cultural appeasement of the “West”, a policy in which Greeks are told that what is most familiar in their lives is actually foreign to their culture – but so, too, do communism and socialism, despite arguments in the past that these were “anti-Greek” because they were antithetical to the heroic – and European – individualism of the Greek people, again in a logic that parallels exactly the logic of the “House Committee on Un-American Activities”.⁴

There is a further irony in such claims to a collective culture of individualism, for the play of agency is completely suppressed both in the various nationalist positions, according to which the entire country must conform to an ideal of more or less uniform national character, and in generic cultural models of the Spenglerian tradition resuscitated by Huntington. Ethnographic attention to the constant ebb and flow of cultural form and identity exposes the forms of agency that motivate the distinction between periphery and core and determine which countries, and which populations or categories within those countries, will be defined as peripheral.

⁴ Communism was labeled “anti-Greek” in the same sense that it became “un-American,” the inverse of an individualism at once possessive (Macpherson 1968) and rugged.

Thus, much as Huntington engages in a rhetorical game of differentiation that draws on an essentializing vision of “culture” as composed of discrete and mutually incompatible units, so the Greek establishment must emphasize the absence of “non-European” – that is, Turkish and Slavic – minorities, deny the pervasive taint of Turkishness in the nation’s cultural heritage, and laud the rebelliousness that won the Greeks their independence from the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, it must severely repress – discursively as well as legally – all forms of social “individualism” that offend the current proprieties associated with a stereotypically “European” identity.

This is fundamentally an argument about what the “West” really means. The usual defences of Western civilization, rationality, and democracy are symbolic exercises in the logic of exclusion and exceptionalism. This is a view of the West that refuses to recognize its groundedness in particular cultural and historical formations. Asad (1993) has argued that the British government’s condemnation of the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie had less to do with freedom of speech than with the identification of British culture with the Christian religion; indeed, Asad argues that in British politics as well as in anthropological theory “religion” as a category is really Christianity. He thus argues that the British official response conflated “freedom of speech” with the politics of exclusion in a country where “blasphemy laws” protect only the religion of the dominant majority. It is possible to push such arguments too far: the United States’ sometimes cynical use of human rights discourse for the purposes of global intervention does not necessarily and invariably invalidate the charge. But the point remains a crucially important one.

For confluences of a particular cultural tradition (“Christianity”, “the Classical tradition”) with a generic order (“religion”, “civilization”) do often serve to disguise the role of those who complain about the allegedly abusive acts associated with alien cultures in generating the enabling conditions for the abuses in question. Claims about Balkan irrationality and atavism are similarly designed to perform the labor of exorcism – they are in effect a smokescreen, and a very effective one, for disguising the interests that at different times and in different places have led powerful international players to translate local feuding institutions from a single district into national and even regional “characters,” “mentalities,” or even “racial memories,” obscuring the agency of powerful external and internal forces in creating nationalistic hatreds anew (see Bringa 1995: 100 *et passim* for important evidence on this point, and Bowen 1996, for an excellent summary and critique of this line of reasoning; see also Denich 1994; Hayden 1996). Again, local institutions of feud may be a very effective template for larger conflicts, and we should not underestimate the receptivity of local societies to external calls to violence. Indeed, the tendency of Greek politicians to blame all their ills on foreign interference works against Greece’s interna-

tional interests because it can too easily be taken as an *abdication* of agency, or as a smokescreen for the political élite's own behind-the-scenes activity. But external interference may also actually intensify what outside observers see as a region's peculiar tendencies. One of the deepest ironies of the Bosnian tragedy is that the Muslims studied by Tone Bringa were far less engaged locally in patrilineally based vendettas than were either the other, Christian ethnicities engaged against them in the conflict or the stereotype of Muslim society held by many observers. If, at the end of the war, they display a greater proclivity for such local-level feuding than they have done until now (and there is no reason to assume that they will do so), who will be to blame?

Such processes of engagement in supra-local conflict, moreover, have a disturbing capacity for self-replication, less because the local cultural values remain in place (as the "atavistic" and "age-old" caricatures would have it), than because the role of external agency, especially that of major international powers, has remained crucial. One of the next areas of major conflict, already reheating to dangerous levels, is very possibly Cyprus. Perhaps, then, we should speculate on why that country is so underrepresented in the anthropological profession. I am not, of course, suggesting that there is some conscious plot to exclude Cyprus from consideration. But I think that there is a most unfortunate tendency to treat Cyprus as marginal because it cannot easily be fitted into the regional categories (Europe, Near/Middle East) of international relations and anthropology alike. The point merits further attention here.

Cyprus was for many decades a British colony. Like Malta and, still, Gibraltar, it was an anomaly – a colony of a European power, yet located – more or less – within the geographical boundaries of Europe, and claiming a measure of moral priority even over Athens as the site of a still older documented form of Hellenism. Many Greeks regard the Cypriots as bastardized barbarians, peripheral Greeks tainted by excessive contact with the Turks, much as they viewed the Asia Minor refugees who flooded Greece in 1924 (Hirschon 1989); like those refugees, too, the Greek-Cypriots cordially and reciprocally despise the mainland Greeks as uncultured, parochial yokels, in part because they have lacked the benefit of British administrative practices and values. Now it strikes me as a fair comment on the essentializing tendencies that we find on *both* sides of the debates about multiculturalism and the Western canon that, in the roster of postcolonies, Cyprus almost never appears. It has fallen victim to a most disturbing combination of its largely European-inflicted pretensions to the status of aboriginal Hellenism and radically European identity on the one hand and its status as a former colony on the other. Like that of Greece and Turkey, but to a much greater degree, its marginality expresses the salience for modern *Realpolitik* of the symbolic

line between East and West, Islam and Christianity, passion and reason, that forms the core of the Eurocentric rhetoric in “culture clash” theory no less than in the visions of cultural Armageddon conjured up by populist hate-mongers from Le Pen to Karadjic. This is not to suggest an intentional collusion with such distasteful characters on the part of the political theorists – indeed, Karadjic might serve their purposes quite well as an exemplar of the more usual “un-European” Balkan stereotype – but simply to note similarities of argumentation that undercut the theorists’ implicit claim to have transcended the cultural differences on which, paradoxically, their entire position rests. Cyprus sits right across the very fault line that Huntington and others have so successfully made their own.⁵

Moreover, the idea that the troubles of Cyprus are a battle between ethnic Greeks and Turks is a convenient myth. A generation ago, most Cypriots – Muslim and Christian alike – spoke *jibréika*, a predominantly Greek language (“dialect”). In Crete before the 1924 compulsory exchange of populations that followed the 1920-22 Greco-Turkish War in Asia Minor, but after the departure of both the Ottoman rulers and the Great Power navies, the two confessional communities had learned to live together; they even worshipped at the same shrines and sponsored each other’s religious festivities, as happened throughout the Balkans and the Arab world. But the hardening of religious into *national* categories has served the essentializing tactics of Great Powers desirous of seeing their respective zones of influence clearly delineated on the map. The part played by the German recognition of Croatia in the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the regeneration of ethnic strife is the most recent, but probably not the last, illustration of what such taxonomic closure, the enforcement of bureaucratic norms of purity, may bring in its wake.

Comparisons among the various nationalisms found on Cyprus abound (most recently, Papadakis 1998). Studies of the role of nationalist rhetoric in the formation of political violence (notably Loizos 1988) have contributed to our wider understanding of how, as local feuds become transmuted into international wars, psychopaths become heroes. And yet the case of Cyprus remains tragically understudied except, in part, by those who have a vested interest in its evolution into a clearer division between two “national” communities divided by an ever more firmly entrenched mutual hatred.

Anthropologists have resisted such easy formulations because, far from illuminating the issues, they contribute to the conceptual problems created by the overgeneralization performed by state and international bureaucracies. Take, for example, the work of Vassos Argyrou (1996a, 1996b).

⁵ Anthropologists who work in Cyprus find it notoriously difficult to get jobs; members of other social science fields generally steer clear of it altogether.

His research exemplifies the identification of complex processes in the details of ethnographic analysis – “in little place a million”, to reiterate part of my epigraph. For example, in his book about weddings – rites of distinction, as Argyrou calls them – he focuses on the deployment of the symbols of bourgeois Westernization and commoditized “tradition” to understand the dynamics of class in a society painfully emerging from a colonial situation that few analysts have been willing to acknowledge as such in the larger discussions of the postcolony (Argyrou 1996a, 1996b). His more recent, article-length study of attitudes to littering – literally a “rubbish” topic for the uninitiated (Argyrou 1997) – again explores the consequences for ideas about the social order of a moral régime perceived to have originated with the departed colonizers and still thought to be imbued with their hegemonic values. Argyrou’s analyses illustrate the complexities of a colonial past in a manner that works against facile assumption about what undifferentiated “Greeks” and “Turks” supposedly do.

To illustrate the point further, let me now return to my fieldwork in the Cretan mountains. A villager complained about the attitude of the people in the capital at Athens to people like himself. They would address him, he said, as *Kritikatse* – a form in which the contemptuous diminutive of *Kritikós*, “Cretan”, is mispronounced by the Athenian, further adding to the weight of his disdain but unable to withstand the Cretan’s own revenge (in which he “re-Cretanizes” the final vowel [/e/ for /i/]. What I omitted to mention in my original account of this usage (Herzfeld 1985: 24-25) was that this man was himself an oddball – an artist who sold his wood sculptures (not a familiar art form in the community) to tourists, a near-fratricide (he once took an ax to his half-brother, who promptly stabbed him; and nothing so reduces the standing of a clan as a demonstrated taste for internecine homicide), a man of almost devastating poverty, and – a major disadvantage in the strongly agnatic community in which he lived – the father of four daughters and no sons. To compound all that, he was incapable of maintaining a flock of sheep – the ultimate failure in a pastoral community. Not only can we see in his diatribe a hall of mocking mirrors indicating multiple levels of mutual contempt, but his case may lead us to suspect that those who are marginalized within their own communities may also possess the best tuned antennae for the consequences of marginality, compounding the already considerable semiotic sensibilities of the whole community. I did note at the time that a good reason for studying such communities lay in their inhabitants’ heightened ability to decode the discourses of real political power, a direct outcome of their perceived exclusion from that power.

What I failed to note was the central importance, for fully understanding his insight, of his own disadvantaged position – and perhaps this was a consequence of the inattention with which some commentators (e.g., Loizos

1986) have correctly charged me to the perspective of the *locally weak* on the bullying tactics of their tougher competitors. Such a man has no resources when he goes to the town to beg for favors from his patrons, powerful politicians who are more than delighted – much though they may deny this – to court the votes of his kinsmen, powerful sheep-thieves with many sons and brothers and thus blocs of votes to place at the politicians' disposal. There he meets in a rawer and more direct form the condescension and active dislike that sophisticated urbanites profess to feel for these savages from the mountains. Once I told a grocer in Iraklio how much I was enjoying the village – he was surprised they had not murdered me! – and how interesting it was to follow the elections there. “What?” he exclaimed. “They have *elections* there?” Yet such a man would have been among the first to denounce me had I dared to suggest that these self-consciously traditionalizing mountain-dwellers were not full citizens of the Greek nation-state, much as it frequently is those who condemn the inhabitants of border zones (such as Macedonia) who most vociferously insist on these regions' perduring Greekness. Such is the egocentric and segmentary logic of nationalistic bigotry: “they” are always inferior to “us”, even when in other contexts they are not merely members of “our” group but, by virtue of the duck-rabbit of tradition mentioned above, the most quintessential representatives of “usness”, to be saved from the taint of miscegenation and corruption by the culturally omniscient speaker.

But the marginal have their own ways of recasting such attitudes to their own advantage. My village friend's remarkable ability to theorize the relationship between his world and that of the powerful capital is amplified by his own deficits – disadvantages of poverty, a lack of sons, and an allegedly irascible disposition that make it easy for others, both within his community and outside it, to sneer at his eccentricities and social weakness. If urbanites who regularly interact with these villagers can imagine them as outside the national election system, how much harder must it be to see them as perceptive decoders of the signs of power that these same attitudes encapsulate?⁶

This very abbreviated account encapsulates a parable for anthropologists themselves. Their exclusion from the fashionable debates about the nature of power is symptomatic, not, I would argue, of a theoretical failure, but, on the contrary, because they are constantly touching a nerve. Perhaps, too, this is why medical anthropology is tolerated by the Western medical establish-

⁶ Similarly, in my work on historic conservation on Crete I mock-innocently asked why the scratched plaster designs on the poorer houses were not being preserved as a monument to the efforts of the working class. “They're not particularly attractive”, I was – predictably – informed. Yet such inscriptions of toil on the physical landscape are common and significant – Sharon Roseman (1996) tells a very similar story about the building of roads in Galicia during the Franco era.

ment only when it deals with those who are socially classified as marginal people (Arthur Kleinman, personal communication; see Kleinman 1995).

Some years after studying these marginal shepherds, I also became deeply interested in illegal apprentices – truant schoolboys, failures from the poorest stratum of Cretan society, precisely because again the play of power in their relationship with their master artisans allows one to see the model of their understanding of class relations in general – indeed, allows one to watch them master it. The study of multiple marginalities in these artisan-apprentice relations has proved revealing. I was studying the weaker members of a peripheral social group in the poorest major town on the marginalized southern island of the weakest European Union member-state. It is this, and *precisely* this, that allows me to focus on the *strategies of marginalization* through which international and local inequalities reproduce each other. This is detailed work – a painstaking task, no less scholarly than are the minutiae of textual exegesis, that the anthropologist must undertake. But, perhaps because of its proximity to both everyday activity and manual labour, it might strike some observers as somehow less scholarly than philological or archival analysis.

It is here, indeed, that the anthropologist runs the greatest risk of becoming a figure of fun. For focusing on the structures of boredom, the habitual bodily practices of signally unimportant people, is no more self-evidently significant than are the ritual laments of Amazonian tribespeople or Balkan and Middle Eastern villagers – not, this time, because they seem too exotic to justify a heavy commitment of effort and finance, but because they seem so humdrum as to be uninteresting even in an intrinsic sense. Anthropology thus faces double jeopardy: when it focuses on the familiar it appears to be creating complications out of what should be obvious; when it focuses on the strange it is deemed irrelevant to “modern” living.

Yet these two dimensions underscore precisely what deficiencies anthropology supplies in the social-science record: it identifies *what is not easily noticed*, for the one reason or the other, and uses that information to question the hierarchy of significance in which, as a historically Western and colonial discipline, it is itself historically embedded. Awareness of that historical burden sometimes also produces a sense of deep anxiety that in turn provokes contempt: why should a discipline so obviously ill at ease with itself be taken seriously by anyone else? The answer, I suggest, is both pedagogical and epistemological: it forces us to question, in a Kuhnian sense that surely should not distress any late-positivist, the assumptions that determine how we delineate our objects of research – and, by extension, decide what really matters. In the politics of significance that emerges, “mereness” is a diagnostic charge.

Anthropology clearly has a political agenda. We may not always agree

about what it is, but most of us agree for much of the time. Issues of human rights, freedom of speech and of the press, resistance to political violence, the firm rejection of racism and all its doings – these would find few opponents in the discipline. If we do not *also* stand up in defense of our own way of analyzing the world, however, we shall be surrendering to precisely those forces – for the penetration of the academy by a market ideology leaves little space either for the analysis of ordinary people’s lives or, what is perhaps equally important (and well within the grasp of a post-modern anthropology willing to analyze élites and other self-important representatives of modernity), for the analysis of important people as ordinary – as bearers of common social and cultural values. The rapid marginalization of the social-anthropological voice is a mark of something very rotten in the kingdom of Denmark.

So how do we respond? I emphatically do *not* advocate popularization at all costs, nor do I necessarily endorse the anti-jargon witch-hunt, which often seems to me to dress an ideological defense of British (“Anglo-Saxon”), U.S. (“plain spoken”), and Australian (“fair dinkum”) anti-intellectualism in the rhetoric of common sense. Indeed, it is anthropology’s concern with everyday matters, and its frequent use of everyday terms to denote them, that leads most easily to the charge of triviality. But that charge itself, as I hope I have made clear, deserves intense scrutiny by the cultural analyst. It also requires a clear defense. We should speak plainly about what is different in our discourse. We need to face, Janus-like, in two directions at once. To our colleagues we should continue to speak in the language of analysis with which we are most familiar. To the larger public of which we are a segment, we must be prepared, not to produce a fawning popularization that no one will find compelling anyway, but to express in forceful terms the importance of the “mere.” Expressing delicate distaste for this engagement is disingenuous, to say the least. When we do fieldwork in the intimate spaces of any society, we have already made a choice, the value of which lies in the possibilities it opens up for a more informed debate about the role of culture in the politics of social life and about the impact of the social on political action.⁷ That is hardly a trivial or insignificant undertaking.

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⁷ The more marginalized a population is politically, I suspect, the more it will develop the capacity to decode the rhetoric of those who exercise power over it. The shepherds with whom I worked on Crete, constantly at odds with the law because of their sheep-stealing and vendettas, had extremely perspicacious things to say about the rhetoric of the national political parties, the motives underlying that rhetoric, and – at a surprisingly abstract level – the nature of semantics in general. Perhaps, indeed, that is another reason why they are viewed with such distrust by the politicians who, through a system of well-established patronage (see Campbell 1964; Herzfeld 1985), nevertheless depend on them for votes.

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Michael Herzfeld

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Michael Herzfeld

A ANTROPOLOGIA E A POLÍTICA
DA RELEVÂNCIA

Através de uma crítica às concepções contemporâneas de características populistas sobre cultura exemplificadas no trabalho de Samuel Huntington (1996), o artigo examina a marginalização da pesquisa antropológica como um sintoma de uma "política global da relevância". O autor explora o raciocínio que se encontra por detrás desta situação e sublinha o modo como ele desvaloriza a experiência quotidiana que constitui o próprio objecto da pesquisa etnográfica e que requer um elevado nível de intimidade com os informantes. O artigo mostra como o trabalho etnográfico coloca consistentemente em questão a imagem reificada de "culturas" que constitui o foco principal da retórica populista que ele critica. Analisa também as bases simbólicas da lógica simultaneamente teleológica e tautológica da visão do mundo politicamente dominante que essa imagem representa.

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