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November 1, 1985 (letter 3)

Dear Colleague:

Sir Edmund Leach, Provost of King's College, Cambridge, and a professor of anthropology has this to say about anthropological fieldwork and writing. "The data from fieldwork are subjective not objective. Every anthropological observer, no matter how well he/she has been trained, will see something that no other such observer can recognize, namely, a kind of harmonic projection of the observer's own personality. And when these observations are 'written up' in monograph or any other form, the observer's personality will again distort any purported 'objectivity.'"

And here is the punch line. "So what should be done? Nothing. Anthropological texts are interesting in themselves and not because they tell us something about the external world." (Annual Review of Anthropology, vol. 13, 1984). Well, even pure fiction writers make a greater claim on reality than that! What makes this remark doubly unexpected is that Leach himself is not a radical post-modernist anthropologist. He was trained, I believe, as a mathematician and his early work dealt with the political economy of certain Burmese tribes in a hardnosed sort of way.

Surely Leach exaggerates? Of course, he does. An anthropologist can go out into the field and count the number of children under age fifteen, the number of pregnant mothers, etc. He can measure the size of the fields and take note of the different kinds of crops grown. All these are objective facts. He can do more. He can relate one set of facts to another, or use one set of facts to explain another. But why only one set of facts, why use only one factor? Well, ok, he will use two sets--but, if two, why not three, four, five, and so on? Clearly it is unsatisfactory to just designate the factors. The scholar will see the need to rank them. Moreover, he will want to see the links--physical as in the flow of energy, socio-psychological as in the chain of deference--between the levels of the system. If he does all these things he will end up with a "thick" text (in Geertz's sense of the word), but what is this "thick" text? Is it an accurate and objective "picture" of reality, or has the "picture" become so elaborated that it is a creative construction in its own right? And if it is a creative construction, then has not the truth-searching scholar become, subtly and unknown to himself, a creative artist and a fiction writer?

Let me provide a somewhat different analogy. We begin modestly by trying to measure the field. We are simply trying to find out something about the field--about nature out there. But, we get caught up in our work and we end up with not just a set of measurements but a house! The house may be a thing of beauty in its own right, but it can hardly claim to be a "picture" of nature out there.

Geographers are not precocious people. I think Carl Sauer said that. It takes us a long time to acquire the scope of knowledge and the kind of insight to do important work. There are no Mozarts among us. Our source of inspiration are people like Charles Darwin, William Wordsworth, Winston Churchill, and Vincent van Gogh, who were not

precocious but who nevertheless eventually attained the heights of their fields. So, at my present tender age, I still hope to be introduced by my colleagues as "a promising geographer."

Another globe? Don't you have anything better? I wish I knew the source of the following anecdote. It is attributed, I think, to Milan Kundera.

A Czech requests a visa to emigrate. The official asks him, "Where do you want to go?" "It doesn't matter," the man replies. He is given a globe. "Please choose." The man looks at the globe, turns it slowly and says, "Don't you have another globe?"

Just as our refined moral systems are purged of obscenity and the stink of death, so our hygienic cities hide death and organic waste--reminders of our animal nature. "Toilets in modern water closets," says Milan Kundera, "rise up from the floor like white water lilies (what a wonderful simile!) Even though the sewer pipelines reach far into our houses with their tentacles, they are carefully hidden from view, and we are happily ignorant of the invisible Venice of shit underlying our bathrooms, bedrooms, dance halls, and parliaments." (The Unbearable Lightness of Being, 1984).

Best wishes,

Yi-Lun