

OBSERVING EUROPE WITH JOHN CAMPBELL:
A LATE VIEW ON THE MEDITERRANEAN TRADITION

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In January 2010, St Antony's College held a meeting in honour of the late John K. Campbell, a distinguished anthropologist and historian of Greece who played a central role in developing the anthropology of Europe at Oxford from the late 1950s to the mid 1990s.¹ I was asked to discuss the experience of working with John in organizing and editing the volume *Europe Observed* (Pina-Cabral and Campbell eds. 1992). As I read the book again for the occasion, I became aware that it marks vividly the deep changes in the practice of ethnography in Europe that occurred in the course of the 1980s at the time of the foundation of the European Association of Social Anthropologists, in which some of us were directly involved. As the book was never widely distributed, some of the implications of what it discusses might deserve renewed attention.

I am fully aware of the dangers of what Merleau-Ponty called 'the retrospective illusion': attributing to the past a coherence that results from posterior events that might just as well have taken place otherwise. That said, I am convinced that much of what I will now proceed to tell you was implicit in our conversations at the time, even if it seldom emerged from them in an analytically explicit way.²

¹ I thank Michael Llewellyn-Smith and the College for having invited me to participate in this event.

² During the mid-1980s, I was working at the University of Southampton and I had a non-stipendiary association with St. Antony's College. For a while, therefore, John Campbell and I met even more often than had been the case during the five years I was a D.Phil. student under his supervision. At the time of the conference and the debates that followed it, Peter Loizos was very supportive, for which we both remained grateful.

In 1986, the then budding Portuguese community of social scientists came together to organize a conference of the European Association of Rural Sociology in Braga. I was asked to convene a workshop on fieldwork methodology and, in turn, I asked John to collaborate with me. He did help me during the planning stage, but ultimately his health did not allow him to go to Braga. As it turned out, the workshop was very stormy for reasons that we did not fully understand at the time. Colleagues from the US, England, Spain, France and Portugal were present, and the themes discussed turned out to be at the centre of the impending debates in the discipline.

Our Spanish colleagues were then deeply upset at the way North American anthropologists were treating them³ and used the event as a forum to air their grievances. As if that were not enough, there were assumptions in the air among the British-trained anthropologists present concerning what were then called ‘Oxford anthropologists’, which, in fact, did not correspond at all to our real opinions, leading to all sorts of misunderstandings among the participants. Immediately after the conference, the polemics spread on to the pages of *Critique of Anthropology* in what turned out to be a fundamentally pointless debate (Llobera 1986, Loizos 1987, Pina-Cabral 1987). Retrospectively, we can all see that we never even disagreed in essence and that we were all in fact responding to a confusion caused by the deep change in international hegemonies within the social sciences that was occurring at the time.

Over the next few years (1986-1990), as post-modern culturalism imposed itself as the status quo around the globe, John Campbell and I felt increasingly that there was a dire need for an explicit re-formulation of the methodological assumptions that had underpinned the British tradition of doing fieldwork in Europe and the Middle East. The label ‘Mediterraneanism’, which had once been consensual, no longer satisfied us due to what was

³ The principal grievance was the then routine practice of silencing any anthropological work that was not published in the United States or Great Britain.

then happening in Greece, the Iberian Peninsula and Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, we felt that these changes were not illuminated any further by the idealist implications of the post-modern re-reading of participant observation that was then all the rage.

Retrospectively, we can see that the problems we were confronting at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall had been there potentially ever since the end of the Second World War, simmering deep within the Evans-Pritchard decades (1950s to 1970s). I do not remember if, in our conversations, we actually formulated it in precisely this way. Still, my paper for that book is called 'Against translation', explicitly challenging the major metaphor that had structured E-P's views on fieldwork (cf. Beidelman 1971). John Campbell knew the paper well and commented on it more than once, and indeed he also knew the paper I published in *Current Anthropology* challenging the notion of the 'Mediterranean' as a culture area (1989).

At the same time, after much discussion, we decided to call the book *Europe Observed*, a reference to Geertz's book *Islam Observed* that had come out in 1968 but was then acquiring a kind of cult following. We meant that Europe should be studied much like Islam – an explicit denial on our part of primitivist presuppositions. And, at the same time, we were stating that there was also an 'observance' in Europe that was part of the actual history of our practice as anthropologists. Whilst we emphatically rejected the idealist implications of American culturalism and the post-Schneiderian turn that Marilyn Strathern's oeuvre on kinship was consolidating at the time (1992), we welcomed with open arms the methodological reflexivity that was then giving rise to an explosion in rhetorical modes of ethnographic writing.⁴

Now, John Campbell was very sparing about his writing. His generation had not been exposed to the compulsion to publish feverishly that is the order of our day. For him to write something about his fieldwork experience, over forty years after the event, he had to feel that

⁴ I myself, during those final years of the 1980s, was writing *Aromas de Urze e de Lama*, a text on the margins between fiction and anthropology that was also published in 1993 and that has recently been re-issued in Portugal.

it was really necessary to do it. His paper in *Europe Observed*, while apparently a simple description, bears within it a heartfelt disclaimer of two forms of misunderstanding which he had to fight against throughout his life: on the one hand, the suspicions concerning his scientific motives with which he was so often confronted in Greece; and on the other hand, the suspicions of the validity of his fieldwork that were always present in Oxford itself.

Looking at it from a distance, we can now see that British Mediterraneanism ailed from three basic equivocations. First, while it was in Britain that fieldwork in Europe and the Middle East first arose in social and cultural anthropology, it was always viewed as a minor mode by the gatekeepers of the discipline. Evans-Pritchard in particular was very disparaging, and John Campbell's career suffered tremendously from this prejudice.

Secondly, while the Europeanist ethnological tradition and German sociological thinking in particular had had a deep influence among Oxford scholars in the early post-war years, this was kept strictly a private matter. The official theoretical genealogy was traced to Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim through Radcliffe-Brown. A lot of effort was spent in producing this genealogy through a number of brilliant translations of the *Année Sociologique* works from which we have all learnt so much (e.g. Hertz 1960; Durkheim and Mauss 1963; Hubert and Mauss 1967; Mauss 1967; Lévy-Bruhl 1975). Only in the late 1990s, through the valuable work of Richard Fardon, did we manage to confirm how important were the marks left in Oxford of Franz Baerman Steiner's teaching (see Fardon and Adler 1999).

Pitt-Rivers's work on Spain in the early 1950s had been supervised by Steiner, who even visited him in the field. But his discussion of German sociological theory had been cut out of *People of the Sierra* on the explicit recommendation of Evans-Pritchard, as Pitt-Rivers unwittingly tells us in the introduction to the American second edition of the work (1971). M.N. Srinivas, Mary Douglas, Laura Bohannan, Louis Dumont and so many more of the original members of the Oxford school were deeply marked by this influence, which we only started to suspect in the late 1980s, as we came to realize that there were serious misrepresentations in how notions such as 'honour and shame' were being read by our colleagues across the Atlantic.

Thirdly, while history had been accepted into anthropological research since Evans-Pritchard's famous formulations in 1950,⁵ a synchronicist methodological disposition had survived. That historical arguments should guide the steps of the fieldworker and of the writer of ethnographic monographs was still seen as vaguely innovative even in the 1980s, as we can see from many of the papers that we included in *Europe Observed*.

The notion that anthropology was defined by its study of peoples that were essentially 'Other' was rooted in an evolutionist notion of primitiveness, that is, the notion that, because the essential forms of human experience must be simple, they must also be anterior – thus instituting what Johannes Fabian called the 'denial of coevalness' (1983). Anthropology had rejected theoretical primitivism for many decades, even though, in the case of Evans-Pritchard, the concept continued to be used until the 1960s (e.g. 1965) – but it was very much slower to recognize the methodological implications of that rejection. Methodological primitivism as a background assumption has survived to this day, and it was because of it that Mediterranean anthropology was treated as a minor mode within the discipline.

For John Campbell, Julian Pitt-Rivers and the rest of the contributors to our volume, in the early 1990s Mediterraneanism as a sub-disciplinary field no longer seemed sustainable essentially for two reasons. On the one hand, the countries of southern Europe that we were working in were no longer so vividly outside the globalized world of the consumer society as they had been at mid-century. John Campbell in Greece, as much as myself in the Iberian Peninsula, were feeling that there was something deeply artificial about proposing a meaningful sociocultural region out of the simple proximity to the Mediterranean Sea. At the time, social history was undergoing a spurt of significant development, and many anthropologists were actively working with it, leading to a much greater sophistication in things like the understanding of variation in models of the family and of household

⁵ 'Social anthropology: past and present', Marett Lecture, Exeter College Hall, Oxford, 1950.

reproduction, or of patterns of village constitution. Comparativist preoccupations started imposing themselves and suggesting that we should look to other forms of historically informed regional comparison.

At the same time, we were deeply dissatisfied with the way in which many American colleagues had turned into ‘culture traits’ things like the ‘honour and shame’ complex, which had initially been conceived as part of a universalistic mode of understanding the relation between person and value. We were especially challenged by some of the more absurd simplifications in the field of local politics and of even more absurd generalizations of ill-conceived Freudian arguments.

Europe Observed was the coming together of three generations of British-trained anthropologists working in Europe with different national backgrounds and with professional affiliations in a number of different national contexts. We were held together by a deep respect for the tradition of fieldwork with participant observation in societies that could not possibly be described as ‘Other’.

While we were keen on salvaging the notion of fieldwork with participant observation that we felt was being threatened by culturalist reflexivism, we were also preoccupied with shedding the heritage of methodological primitivism that seemed to lie just below the surface of all the new post-modern rhetoric that was being thrown at us from all sides. Indeed, considering some of the debates that have been going on of late in the discipline, I ask myself whether anthropology really has managed to overcome those background assumptions that we inherited from our modernist ancestors, who first defined the discipline in the mid-nineteenth century. I must insist that, from my experience, neither John Campbell nor Julian Pitt-Rivers shared such a view, and the lessons they had to give us at the time are still worth reading nearly two decades later.

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