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"World Anthropologies" and Anthropologies in the World: Three Perspectives

A Review Essay

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Every scientific "fulfilment" raises new "questions": it asks to be surpassed and outdated (Weber 1946: 138).

Introduction: The One and the Many

The three volumes under review all deal with the contemporary practice of anthropology and social sciences in a global perspective.¹ Obviously, they differ in focus: from the primarily theoretical evaluation of "Western social theory's seeming exhaustion or inadequacy when dealing with ... cross-cultural thinking" (Kurasawa 2004: ix), through critical explorations of four "great traditions" of anthropology (Barth et al.), to the more

general attempt to "explore the diversity of anthropologies being practiced around the world" today (Ribeiro and Escobar 2006: 1).

Kurasawa's volume explicitly deals with issues of "otherness" (alterity) and difference, while it is present implicitly in Ribeiro and Escobar's book (but see Krotz in the same volume 2006: 89). It would probably be safe to say that alterity and difference were crucial for the human questioning of different (and potentially threatening) others at least from José de Acosta's² "*Historia natural y moral de las Indias*" in 1590.³ It would also be safe to say that the quest for understanding others was at the same time defining for the (rarely explicit task of) understanding ourselves, and anthropology has contributed to this since its very beginnings. Naturally, there were different traditions and different theories; there were grueling intellectual debates between advocates of the "monogenetic" and "phylogenetic" theories in the early 19th century, then there was the issue of the "psychic unity of mankind," so forcefully championed by Bastian and his followers (and Franz Boas was one of them); finally, the issue of the "cultural circles" and the spread of culture and civilization (with Rivers' 1911 address to the Section H of the British Association for the Advancement of Science as the defining moment⁴), and many more

2 José de Acosta (1539–1600), Spanish Jesuit and at the time of his death Rector of the University of Salamanca. He spent several years (1571–1576) in South America, then two years in Mexico. As a result, he published "*De natura Novi Orbis et de promulgatione evangelii apud Barbaros*" (Salamanca, 1588–1589), which was subsequently translated into Spanish. His book became an instant bestseller, and it is interesting to note that he assumed that the American Indians came from Asia (Mongolia) via land – and this was more than a century before Beringia was "discovered" by West Europeans!

3 Of course, it could be argued that the interest in explaining "the Other" predates this – going as far back as Herodotus's "Histories" in the 5th century BCE, Diodorus and Pausanias in ancient Greece (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 37), or Ibn Khaldun's travel accounts in the 12th century CE. Lévi-Strauss claimed that these accounts were not really "anthropological" (or "ethnological") because they did not use critical methodology and comparisons between cultures – preferring mostly to describe them.

4 W. H. R. Rivers in his opening address claimed that changes in human societies were a direct consequence of the mixture of peoples and cultures. Here Rivers referred to the works of German ethnologists (Fritz Gräbner and Bernhard Ankermann, both of whom presented their groundbreaking papers in Berlin in 1905, in support of Leo Frobenius's theory of "cultural circles"), who were establishing a diffusionist model for the development of cultures. This model would provide a crucial tool for Rivers's monumental "*The History of Melanesian Society*," because as Melanesian cultures were "complex" (as they included a mixture of elements

1 Barth, Fredrik, Andre Gingrich, Robert Parkin, and Sydel Silverman: *One Discipline, Four Ways*. British, German, French, and American Anthropology. With a Foreword by Chris Hann. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 406 pp. ISBN 0-226-03829-7. Price: \$ 21.00.

Kurasawa, Fuyuki: *The Ethnological Imagination. A Cross-Cultural Critique of Modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. 249 pp. (Contradictions, 21). ISBN 0-8166-4239-7. Price: \$ 70.50.

Ribeiro, Gustavo Lins, and Arturo Escobar (eds.): *World Anthropologies. Disciplinary Transformations within Systems of Power*. Oxford: Berg, 2006. 341 pp. (Wenner-Gren International Symposium Series) ISBN 1-8452-0190-6. Price: \$ 99.95.