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The ideological and political implications of doing anthropology 'at home' (Eastern Peru)¹

"...my political attitude has not really been modified by the fact that I became an anthropologist: it remained outside, and almost impervious to, my professional thinking and so I must admit that it is an essentially emotional attitude"

(Claude Lévi-Strauss, in Charbonnier 1969: 13)

"All knowledge is political and the refusal of politics is a political act"

(Anthony Wilden 1972: XXII)

When confronted with the subject of the praxis of the anthropologist 'at home' it may be said that, in general terms, there are two ways of focusing it: either by centering the analysis on the relationship between the anthropologist and the social structure of which he or she is an integral part, or by placing the emphasis on his or her relationship with the particular social group which he or she has chosen as a subject of study. In either way what is at stake is the role of anthropologists both as members of their society, and as scientists with specialized knowledge of particular social groups which are part, or are included, in the larger social unit. Thus, the structural position of those anthropologists who work 'at home' is directly or indirectly that of mediators. I shall contend that this mediating role, whether consciously assumed or not, is necessarily associated with particular political stances insofar as these anthropologists are involved (intentionally or unintentionally) in the political dynamics of the national society, while at the same time they are drawn by the particular problematic of the peoples (or groups of peoples) whose experiences they have or are sharing.

I shall contend that whether actively or not anthropologists working at home are bound to participate in one way or another in the political interplay between the society to which they belong as 'natural citizens', and the social group 'of which they become 'adopted members' by means of the well established practice of "participant observation'. I shall also contend in contrast with Lévi-Strauss that there is a very intricate interaction between the anthropologist's 'political attitude' and his or her 'professional thinking'. Hence, I shall argue, firstly, that the praxis of the anthropologist is bound to have an impact on his or her political attitude (either by confirming or altering his or her previous political points of view) insofar as it is fully immersed in the mainstream of social events; and, secondly, that his or her political attitude not only influences his or her professional thinking but, moreover, that the one cannot be extricated from the other. By 'political' here I have in mind the broad definition of the term as rendered by the Oxford English Dictionary: "Of, belonging, or pertaining to the state or body of citizens, its government and policy, especially in civil and secular affairs", and not the more restricted sense which reduces the political to party politics.

In a very recent essay, which is bound to be controversial, Leach contends "that the sociology of the environment of social anthropologists has a bearing on the history of social anthropology" (1984: 3). In asserting this Leach is suggesting that class extraction, ethnic origins, and/or religious beliefs are some of the factors that mould a certain kind of approach to the subject of study and give a definite taint to particular viewpoints. In analyzing the contributions of the leading British social anthropologists Leach adds:

In *Revindi*, 2: 39-49. Budapest. (1988)

“the ‘prominent individual scholars’ were ordinary human beings who had private as well as public life histories. Whatever they did or said as anthropologists was simply a ‘structural/metaphoric transformation’ of what they did and said in quite nonanthropological contexts” (1984: 3).

It may be argued that Leach’s assertion is somewhat extremist (although in being so he is consistent with the kind of intellectual audacity which characterizes the best amongst his works), but what cannot be denied is the influence exerted by particular social environments on the intellectual production of the anthropologist. In his *Ideology and Utopia*, Karl Mannheim had already pointed out that the ideas and representations of any given social factor are a function “of his position in his social milieu” (1936: 50). Accordingly, Mannheim developed the concept of ‘relational knowledge’ which is based on “the assumption that there are spheres of thought in which it is impossible to conceive of absolute truth existing independently of the values and positions of the subject and unrelated to the social context” (1936: 70–71). Leach’s remarks, to which I subscribe, not only reassume Mannheim’s line of thought, but clearly oppose Lévi-Strauss’ stance as quoted above. While Lévi-Strauss separates the sphere of scientific research from that of political reflection (and/or action), Leach seems to suggest, though not in so many words the indivisibility of the anthropologist who would be simultaneously a ‘man of science’ and a ‘political man’. I would contend that this is even more the case in the context of carrying out anthropological research ‘at home’.

The problem of objectivity in the context of anthropology has generally been posed in terms of distance and, more specifically, in terms of geographical distance. The assumption has been that the greater the geographical distance (and with it the ‘cultural’ distance which is thought to be almost equivalent), the easier it becomes to attain objectivity. In other words, there has been a reification of what could be called the ‘privileged eye of the outsider’. Lévi-Strauss, for instance, asserts that “it is very difficult to bridge the gap between the objective attitude one strives to maintain when considering other communities from the outside and the situation in which one finds oneself, willy-nilly, inside one’s own society” (in Charbonnier 1969: 13). Anthropology at home would be, from this point of view, the least objective of our discipline’s endeavours. However, there is little doubt that many investigators would not subscribe to such view. Merleau-Ponty, although not an anthropologist himself, is very firm in establishing that anthropology (or ethnology) is not a discipline which is defined by report to its purported subject-matter, i.e. the ‘exotic primitive societies’. And he goes on to claim that anthropology is above all:

“a way of thinking, the way which imposes itself when the object is ‘different’ and requires us to transform ourselves. We also become the ethnologists of our own society if we set ourselves at a distance from it” (1969: 120).

According to Merleau-Ponty, then, objectivity is attainable when doing anthropology at home provided that the anthropologist creates a ‘distance’ between himself and the object (which is always a subject) of his or her study. Another way of focusing this problem is to assert that the ‘distance’ required by Merleau-Ponty’s proposition is already present in one’s own society, and that the ‘remote’ is not a matter of objective spatial distance, but of subjective social (and cultural) distance.

Leach is not concerned by geographical or cultural distance and he very plainly asserts:

“that 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’” (1984: 22).²

In acknowledging the personality of the anthropologist as a kind of photographic filter through which field data acquire a different colouring Leach is indirectly emphasizing the social nature of the anthropologist inasmuch as we know that ‘personality’ is the result of innate traits as well as socially acquired features. In spite of his defence of the concept of ‘distance’ as a means of attaining objectivity, Merleau-Ponty is also aware of the multiple ways in which the anthropologist stands between his or

her perceptions and the object/subject of his or her research. At this point of his argument, Merleau-Ponty brings in the question of the personal motives of the field researcher and suggests that we should:

“have to say what these motives are too, precisely because we want to be true. Not because ethnology is literature, but because on the contrary its uncertainty ends only if the man who speaks of man does not wear a mask himself” (1969: 120).

It is with these aspects of the praxis of the anthropologist that I am interested in the present paper. In his introduction to *System and Structure*, Anthony Wilden claims that the methodological requirements of closure in science, i.e. the isolation of any given system or object of study so that it may be analyzed, has been (mis)used:

“to justify the isolation of the researcher from his context: from his past, from his social and academic position, from his future expectations, from his economic status in a hierarchical system of privilege, from his conscious or unconscious positive or negative commitment to a set of ideological and political views -all of which one may expect to discover in various transformations in his work” (1972: XXII).

It is precisely this context, the context of the anthropologist doing anthropology at home, which shall be the main concern of my paper. I have already suggested that any anthropologist doing anthropology at home is bound to have a more or less conscious mediatory role. In fulfilling this role the anthropologist is confronted with the social group which is the subject of his or her research both as an individual with particular personal traits, and as a social actor with a particular social background in a particular social environment. There are, thus, two levels through which this confrontation takes place: an existential level and a political one. Both stand as filters for the impressions, perceptions and experiences gathered during fieldwork and render the task of attaining objectivity an impossible one. When fieldwork is carried out within the frame of one's own society the possibility of attaining objectivity becomes particularly difficult, for membership in the society in question implies the pre-existence of certain emotional response and political convictions. These emotions and convictions are not absent or less ingrained in those who choose a social configuration geographically and culturally distant from their own; though, admittedly, they might be less apparent and, particularly, less exacting. For this reason, I shall contend with Lévi-Strauss when, in a very Lévi-Straussian way, he reserves emotions to characterize his political attitude while excluding them from the intellectual task. I would suggest that this distinction between mind and emotions, intellect and affections follows from the logical premises upon which structuralism is built, and that more than an actual reality it is an effect of structuralism's particular way of constructing reality. As a Latinamerican doing fieldwork in Latin America I have frequently been confronted with situations in which the attainment of this type of cold and detached scientific objectivity not only seemed impossible, but was definitely undesirable. In the following pages I shall develop these ideas not so much with a theoretical purpose in mind, but almost in an autobiographical fashion. Thus, at least for this one time, the anthropologist (in this case myself) will occupy the place otherwise reserved for those who are usually the subject-matter of anthropology.

The existential anthropologist

Although a Uruguayan citizen I have lived in Perú since 1975. It was in Lima that I started and completed my undergraduate degree in Social Anthropology. My life is thus very much tied up to Perú which, shortly after my arrival there, I consciously chose as my adoptive country. Being a Latinamerican my incorporation to Peruvian society was not difficult despite of some deep social differences between Perú and my country of origin. For these reasons it should be assumed (for it has been my choice) that I am writing from the standpoint of a Peruvian although not a Peruvian-born myself. Furthermore, many of the opinions presented in this paper are shared by many of my Peruvian colleagues who, like myself, have done fieldwork in the Peruvian Amazon area.³

When I started thinking about how it felt doing anthropology at home the first thing that struck my mind was that it felt like being a foreigner in one's own country. Students of anthropology in Perú are bound to have a class background that ranges from the newly formed and emergent middle classes to the upper classes. Their cultural background is embedded within the larger frame of Western Judeo-Christian culture. Until 1920 this was expressed through the close cultural (and economic) ties of the Peruvian dominant classes with Germany, great Britain and especially France. After World War I the U.S.A. became the cultural (and economic) model to be imitated. The class extraction and cultural specificity of the students of anthropology in Perú is further embodied in what could loosely be defined as a racial distinctiveness. Class and racial distinctions overlap in Peru: the middle and upper classes being 'white' as opposed to the lower *mestizo* and Indian classes. 'Whiteness' here must be taken as having more of a social and cultural content than an actual racial component. That is to say that 'whiteness' is not determined purely on physical or genetical grounds, but is made up of cultural and socio-economic features. For an outsider many Peruvian 'whites' might look physically undistinguishable from their *mestizo* counterparts. This lack of physical differentiation notwithstanding, there are subtle secondary features (e.g. dress, gestures, vocabulary and pronunciation, bodily attitudes, etc.) that disclose a certain cultural and economic background which, in the last analysis, constitutes the diacritical element. This is not to say that there are no racial distinctions at all. There are, and they are played out by the whites at their most to draw class boundaries and maintain the dominance and unity of the upper classes.

How do these characteristics affect the anthropologist while doing fieldwork? I shall answer this question on the basis of my own experience with the Amuesha, an indigenous Amazonian society of the Arawak linguistic family that inhabit the eastern slopes of the Peruvian portion of the Andean range. The Amuesha presently number 5,000 dispersed in thirty small settlements of 'native communities' in what is left of their once large traditional ethnic territory. The Amuesha are slash-and-burn agriculturalists, and in many areas they still largely depend on hunting and gathering to complement their gardens' produce. In the past decades they have become gradually involved in market activities, either through market-oriented coffee cultivation or cattle raising or as wage labourers for the neighbouring large landowners. I carried out fieldwork amongst the Amuesha people in two opportunities: between March—November 1977, and May 1983—June 1984.⁴

As soon as I started living in the community of Loma Linda in 1977, the Amuesha classified me and my Peruvian colleague Frederica Barclay as *gringos*. In the following paragraphs I shall analyze the place of this ethnic category within the larger Amuesha system of interethnic categorization. The Amuesha term *mereñtsorey* is a general term that designates any social grouping which is non-Amuesha and has unified characteristics. As an equivalent for this term they use the Spanish word *raza* (race). However, this translation distorts the real meaning of the term. The root *mereñets* makes reference to the biological 'increase' or 'multiplication' of animals and human beings, while the suffix *-rey* suggests the idea of 'root' or 'from the same root' (i. e. descent). Therefore, the term *mereñtsorey* might well be translated as 'any group of people who have increased from the same root'. Besides this general term the Amuesha have specific terms to label the different social groups with which they are in contact. The Amuesha designate themselves by the term *yanasha* ('*ya-* = we; *nesha*' = group of people) which might be rendered into English as 'we, the people', in contrast with the other surrounding social groups which are perceived as being more or less human in different degrees. Amongst these: the Andean indigenous peoples whom are called *cholles* (a term derived from the Spanish *cholo* which elsewhere in Perú designates only the *mestizos* and/or acculturated Andean Indians); the *mestizo* peoples whom are labelled collectively as *puñanasha*'; and the whitemen whom are known as *ocanasha*'.

The term *gringo*, although not an Amuesha term, is used by the Amuesha as a subdivision of this latter category.⁵ The diacritical element is that a *gringo* is a non-Peruvian white. The Amuesha make this differentiation due to the fact that most of the white people they are in contact with are either the descendants of the German peasants that settled in the region around 1850-60, or the U.S.

and European technicians, linguists and pastors that have intermitently lived in the Amuesha native communities. As a consequence the term *gringo* is frequently extended to any given white person irrespective of whether he or she is Peruvian or not. For this reason, the Amuesha frequently reserve the term *peruanos* (Peruvians) for those in the category of *pueñanasha* (*mestizos*). This is simply due to the fact that most of the surrounding settlers are *mestizos* from the Andean highlands who make a point of being Peruvians, in contrast to the Andean Indians for whom the fact of being Peruvians is somewhat irrelevant or meaningless. As a result the white anthropologist (and for that all of us are 'whites') is defined as a foreigner: a foreigner in his or her own country. No matter how much he or she insists on the fact of being Peruvian the Amuesha will classify him or her as a *gringo*, i.e. a non—Peruvian white.

The Amuesha system of interethnic labelling makes clear several things. To start with the Amuesha do not consider themselves as being Peruvians (although this situation is gradually changing with extensive State schooling, and the introduction of identity documents and of compulsory military service). They also exclude from this category the surrounding Amazonian and Andean indigenous peoples because, like themselves, they are *acheñ* = people. And for different reasons (because they are supposed to be foreigners) they also exclude whites.

This state of affairs is tied up with and reflects the Amuesha philosophical and anthropological disquisitions about interethnic relations as they are presented in the myth of *Enc*. In this narrative the mythical figure of *Enc* stands for the historical Inca ruler and or the Inca people (Andean people). There is oral, linguistic, archaeological and historical evidence that suggests that the Amuesha had long standing contacts with the Inca empire in pre-Columbian times. In the above mentioned myth *Enc* appears as the son of a divinity by an Amuesha virgin. He was sent as a divine emissary to take care of the Amuesha, but instead of doing so he abused of his god-like powers and killed and beheaded many of his followers/subjects. *Enc* was married to *Yachor Palla*' (Our Mother *Palla*'), the daughter of the supreme divinity *Yato*' *Yos* (Our Grandfather *Yos*); but they quarrelled and she fled back to heavens. In his eventful search for her *Enc* inadvertently unsealed the mystical doors that kept the whitemen away. That is how, according to the Amuesha, the whitemen appeared: through the fallibility of an enraged semi-divine figure who had little self-control. In symbolical terms the myth presents us with a triangle of interethnic relations (see Fig. I): at the apex the Amuesha, the people *par excellence*, represented by *Yachor Palla*'; at one of the bottom angles *Enc* symbolizing the Andean indigenous peoples with whom the Amuesha struggled, but who are nevertheless within the system and, as such, *insiders*; and at the other bottom angle the whitemen, the *outsiders*, who are but an unforeseen accident in Amuesha history.

Given this three-sided view it is not surprising that the *mestizos* are the only ones to be considered Peruvians. According to the myth, the origin of the other three categories stretches far back in time, long before something called Perú even existed. The Amuesha (and those who, like them, are considered to be *acheñ* or people) are the primordial 'insiders'; the whitemen were and will always remain the ultimate 'outsiders'. The *mestizos*, on the other hand, are but newcomers to the scene, having no place in the events of mythical times.

When confronted with such a worldview (which, in more or less the same terms, is shared by the Amuesha with many other tropical forest societies) the white Peruvian anthropologist is overcome with a deep feeling of discomfort. This is due to the fact that the Amuesha worldview most accurately depicts the position of the whitemen within the country. Peruvian whites still have an air of *conquistadores* (conquerors) about them. They still behave very much as their Spanish ancestors: contemptuous of the original inhabitants of the land and disdainful of their cultures. They have remained ignorant of any reality that goes beyond the limits of the reality they have created for themselves: a society of Spanish-speaking Catholics of European stock and culture. They have only scratched the surface of the land and of its original peoples and without any understanding they have turned their backs on them. More than 400 years after their arrival they are still foreigners to the land.

It was this sudden awareness of aloofness and uprootedness that assaulted me while doing field-work. And it has been this same feeling that has led many Peruvian anthropologists to achieve a new

ations, hence, “show us the essential limits of our being” (Wild 1963: 81). In this particular case, I would suggest, they reveal the limits of our being in society, a society characterized by struggle and conflict on class, racial and cultural lines. Existentialism claims that it is impossible to escape from these boundary situations — “They are like unscalable walls which bear down upon us” (Wild 1963: 80) — and that in the end we shall be shattered by them. On the other hand, far from being fatalist existentialist philosophy believe that the only possibility open to us (and the only that provides a meaning to our lives) is to struggle against them. The challenge is ours to take.

The following is an attempt to depict through my own field experiences the main features that characterize the boundary situation in which Peruvian anthropologists find themselves as a result of their professional activities. According to Amuesha mythology the whiteman’s wealth and ingenuity were obtained from the Amuesha divinities. One of these myths, that of *Yompor Yompuer* (Our Father *Yompuer*), relates how in ancient times a woman found a nice, white polished stone in the river bed while she was fishing. She took the stone with her and left it in the forest trail before she entered the cleared grounds of her house. During the night she heard the stone singing. She told her husband about it, and he asked her to bring the stone home. She did so, and the following day the stone turned into a person. It was Our Father *Yompuer* who had been sent by the divinities of the highest category to mitigate the sufferings of the Amuesha people. *Yompuer* used to sing for nights on end. He told the people to learn his songs if they wanted to be saved and become immortal as the pods themselves, but they laughed at him and they mocked him by following the rhythm of his songs with the sounds of their farts. One day *Yompuer* told the people that the whitemen were about to arrive and that in no circumstance should they allow the whitemen to get hold of him. But when the white people came the Amuesha fled in terror leaving *Yompor Yompuer* behind. The whitemen, then, carried the divinity away back to their homeland. There they built him a large and beautiful house where they adored him. For this reason, *Yompuer* bestowed on them his life-giving breath and life-giving force (*pa'toreñ*) and nowadays the whitemen multiply while the Amuesha population decreases. *Yompor Yompuer* also taught the whitemen how to make whatever they needed; that is why they now know how to make trucks and airplanes and all kinds of useful machines.

According to this myth, because the whitemen were more faithful to the Amuesha divinities than the fallible Amuesha themselves, they were granted the capacity to create. The Amuesha term for this capacity is *yehcateñets*. In a daily life context it may be rendered as ‘to build’; in a mythical context, however, it refers as a noun to the ‘creative power’ which is exclusive of the divinities, while as a verb it refers to the actions of ‘making something to appear’, ‘creating’ or ‘generating’. The fact that whites share with the divinities this quality of being able to ‘create out of nothing’ makes them, from a certain point of view, almost divine themselves. Thus, although they are the primordial ‘outsiders’ (or precisely because of that) whites are conceived as being almost ‘superhuman’. In my case that assumed characteristic was acknowledged by the Amuesha by addressing me in terms of grandfather = *to*.⁶ The use of this kinship term by peoples who were many years my seniors was an implicit (and sometimes explicit) indication of the respect due to someone considered to be superior in knowledge and status.

However, the mere fact that I was addressed by a kinship term at all meant that I was somehow being incorporated into the society of the Amuesha. The use of the Amuesha kinship term for grandfather was, therefore, a mark for both my ‘insidedness’ as for my ultimate ‘outsidedness’. In addressing me in such a way the Amuesha showed a deep awareness of my ambivalent position while simultaneously reaffirming it. However, the position of insider/outsider is ultimately one of unstable equilibrium and for this reason, depending on the context, one or the other side of the balance was weighed down. Besides the self-designation term *yanesha*, the Amuesha use the term *yamo 'tsesha*’ with varying degrees of inclusiveness to refer to different Ego-centered social groups. The root *amo'ts* makes reference to a friendly social relation between any two given parties. The verb *amo'tsteñets* refers to the action of establishing friendly and harmonious social relations either with someone previously unrelated to Ego, or with someone with whom Ego has quarrelled and is not in speaking terms with. Thus, the term *yamo 'tsesha*’, ‘those with whom we have friendly and harmonious social relations’,

might include Ego's nuclear family, his or her bilateral kindred, or might even be stretched to include all of the Amuesha people. According to the context in which it is used the Amuesha translate this term into the Spanish terms *familia* (relatives by blood or marriage), or *paisano* (fellow-countryman). It is in this latter context, in which all the Amuesha are conceived of as *yamo 'tshsha'*, i.e. as a 'big family', where I would sometimes be included myself.

The following example shows how this inclusion could take place. One day, when visiting a household in Loma Linda for the first time, I greeted those who were present with the eustomary formula: *Ellelro, nemo'tas* (Good afternoon, I'm visiting you) pronounced in the selfconscious manner that the Amuesha find appropriate in those circumstances. The lady of the house invited me to seat down and asked me several questions in Amuesha. When I told her, in Spanish, that I was just starting to learn the language she answered very amused that she had thought that I was her '*gringo* fellow-countryman' (*mi paisano gringo*). This expression, which is a contradiction in terms, could only be coined by her because she originally thought that I shared her language. Not only the command of the Amuesha language makes the anthropologist eligible to be included within the category of *yamo 'tshsha'* in its broadest sense. Such elements as 'knowing' how to drink manioc beer, 'knowing' how to eat forest snails, or 'knowing' how to chew coca leaves in the proper ritual fashion also transform the anthropologist into an 'insider'.

As long as I was considered an 'outsider' I had a 'superhuman' character thanks to the creative powers that the whitemen had reputedly acquired from the Amuesha divinities in mythical times. But as soon as I began to be considered an 'insider' my ignorance of the most basic forest knowledge made me to be regarded as little more than a six year old child (as a matter of fact the six to eight year olds were frequently the only ones who had enough patience to put up with my lack of knowledge, and I would many times be grateful if they took me as their playmate). As a result my status permanently shifted from one extreme to the other: from being an outsider to being an insider; from being considered extremely knowing, to being regarded as an ignoramus; from being a respected grandfather to being a vulnerable child. This double standard poses unavoidable contradictions, especially when one is forced to put aside the anthropologist's required neutrality to enter into the field of national politics.

As someone who understood (after many failures and *gaffes*) their culture and had experienced their problems, while having at the same time an understanding of the mechanisms of the larger society, the Amuesha would frequently ask me to help them in dealing with national or regional authorities. This posed certain problems. Although I have been talking about the Amuesha as if they all constituted one single person (a frequent distortion in our discipline) this does not mean that all of the Amuesha think alike, or agree as to which should be the solutions for the different problems they face. Within Amuesha society there also are different political stances and political factions. This means that the anthropologist is forced to make a decision about whom to support. Once the decision is made (and it is unavoidable not to make it) the anthropologist necessarily alienates himself from those who have opposite views. For this latter faction the anthropologist remains an outsider, while an insider for those whom he supports. But at a higher level the anthropologist ultimately remains always an outsider: even those whom he supports regard him with a certain distrust (sometimes very subtle), for after all the anthropologist is a white member of the politically and economically dominant classes.

On the other hand, by supporting the cause of the indigenous peoples the Peruvian anthropologist alienates him or herself from his or her class of origin, and is regarded as some sort of self-inflicted outcast. This is especially true with regards to the local (white) power groups. When I first arrived to the area with my colleague we received several invitations to visit the homes of the largest amongst the local landowners (most of them the descendants of German, Italian and Yugoslavian settlers who arrived to Perú during the second half of the last century). Very soon we found out that these invitation were routinary, and that every time that any State functionary (agronomists, engineers, medical doctors, teachers) or 'person of importance' arrived to the area they were profusely entertained by the local landowners (within the limits of the comforts available) who hoped by these means to benefit in one way or another from their quests' future good-will. In inviting these functionaries — who are

generally connected to local governmental projects such as the building of roads or hospitals, the carrying out of a diversity of surveys and development projects, or the measurement and allocation of land — the local landowners looked forward to play on their guests' prejudices in order to present themselves as the dynamic elements of the region in contrast to the Amuesha who were depicted as being lazy, dirty, unproductive and backward. Our refusal to let ourselves be driven into this game, our hesitation to accept their invitations, and our attempts to reduce our contacts with them to the bare minimum required by politeness did not help us to become popular amongst them. But what in the last analysis alienated ourselves from them was our outspoken lack of prejudices against the Amuesha. Not only because we would not condemn Amuesha customs and practices (which the local powerful regarded as either backward, pagan or unhygienic), but because, in fact, we practiced them on a daily basis.

One such custom was that of chewing coca leaves. Amuesha men and women chew coca in different opportunities and for different purposes. But always the chewing of coca leaves constitutes a ritual act. Coca leaves are chewed while working in the gardens, during prolonged walks, or while hunting at night. If asked why they chew coca leaves the Amuesha would most probably answer that they do so in order to avoid the feeling of fatigue, cold or hunger; and this is true. But what is truly relevant for the Amuesha is the mystical dimension of the chewing of coca, for it is through the chewing of coca leaves that they obtain useful knowledge as to the best spot to fish or hunt, the best site to build a house, or the pathogenic objects that are making someone ill. Through the consumption of coca-leaves the Amuesha get in contact with the sacred forces that animate the universe and obtain a knowledge that comes from beyond the boundaries of the visible world. The local settlers know about the empirical advantages that obtain from the use of coca and although they regard it as something repugnant they do not hesitate in paying their Amuesha wage labourers partly in cash, and partly in coca leaves. On the other hand, the Amuesha know that most of the white local settlers regard the use of coca as something dirty and backward proper of 'savage' peoples. So the fact that the settlers pay their wages partly in coca leaves while at the same time abstaining from consuming it themselves is a sign that sums up the relation of domination that they entertain with the Amuesha: the Amuesha coca consumers being the dominated inferiors, while the white non-consumers play the role of the superior dominators. That we as whites would chew coca like the Amuesha and, moreover, that we would understand and dignify its use challenged their discourse of domination and the legitimacy and credibility of this symbolic rendering of their relation of domination. Domination is very much dependent on instilling in the dominated the idea that they deserve to be dominated due to their reputed inferiority. In other words, domination is dependent on forcing the dominated to feel inferior to the dominators. By chewing coca leaves we were challenging that assumption and, accordingly, we were regarded by the local powerful as highly 'subversive'.

The political anthropologist

I could multiply the examples of our 'subversive' activities, but I believe that the above example sufficiently depicts the nature of our confrontation with the local power groups. The result, again, is an existential dilemma by which the anthropologist is placed in a kind of limbo: between the culture in which he was brought up and that which he has come to know and appreciate; and between the interests of his class of origin and those of the oppressed peoples with whom he works. This dilemma with its emotional demands necessarily affects the anthropologists' intellectual and political perceptions and reflections. In Perú this has found expression in a new national awareness on the part of many anthropologists who are now striving to establish the basis for a new conception of 'nation'. One of the premises of this new awareness is that Perú will not be able to become a full-bodied 'nation' if it does not recognize its cultural and ethnic pluralism, and the rights of the indigenous peoples to autonomous regional self-government. It is felt that only by means of such a recognition might a constructive and comprehensive 'national identity' be developed.

For the above reasons, many Peruvian anthropologists find it difficult to avoid (and would not want to avoid) getting involved in the painful but promising process by which the Amazonian indigenous peoples strive for a more just and autonomous place within national society. But as Barclay asserts:

“What is a painful process for these societies, poses difficult questions to those anthropologists who place themselves within a national perspective. It also places them between two fronts. On the one hand, they are seen by the State and by the agents of the strategy of internal colonialism as subversive elements — since they question the monoethnic definition of the nation and support Indian claims. On the other, the newly formed ethnic political organizations which are strengthening their ethnic identities often regard anthropologists as allies, but at the same time as intermediaries and, in this sense, as obstacles to their self-determination” (1985: 1–2).

The way out of this political and existential trap is still not water clear for those involved. The answers to the questions posed are varied and many have followed opposite ways: there are those who believe that there is nothing to be done and that history itself will mould the results of this clash between oppressors and oppressed, and there are those who believe that each individual effort contributes to the making of history; there are those who believe that anthropologists should have a secondary role and that the leading voice should be that of the indigenous leaders themselves, and there are others that argue that anthropologists have a voice of their own, means that are distinctively their own, and an audience of their own and that, therefore, their role should be complementary and not a function of that of the indigenous leaders. The answers, as I have said, are numerous, but the important thing is that the questions are the same, and that they have been asked at all in the first place.

In this paper I have tried to show that in Perú the anthropologists' political stance cannot be separated from their intellectual activities as Lévi-Strauss purports to do. Moreover, I have tried to demonstrate that their political and intellectual perceptions are tainted both by their social and cultural background, as by the nature of their experiences with the social groups with which they have been working. In the case of Perú I hope I have been able to show how these two factors lead the anthropologist into an existential dilemma — a boundary situation — which is highly charged with emotions. Is objectivity possible under these conditions? If we are looking for the objectivity of the natural sciences the answer is no. But if we define 'objectivity' (as Mannheim would) in terms of an attempt to give a serious, comprehensive and critical fresh look at the structures of one's own and others' societies, then one may conclude that Peruvian anthropologists have attained this type of objectivity without disregarding the subjectivity of their own structural position in Peruvian society.

NOTES

- (1) A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists on the topic *Anthropology at home*; University of Keele; 1985
- (2) Admittedly, as Firth pointed out (personal communication), one can only trace the relationship between a scholar's intellectual production and his or her social background as *a posteriori* act; whereas the hypothesis that suggests that the existence of such relationship could only be definitely proved right if we were able to establish *a priori* the kind of work that a young anthropologist would develop in the future merely on the basis of what we know about his present social background.
- (3) I would particularly like to thank Frederica Barclay, a colleague and friend, with whom I carried out my first fieldwork and from whose professional example and intellectual discussions I have so much benefited.
- (4) I am indebted both to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research as to the Central Research Fund of the University of London without whose financial assistance I would have not been able to carry out my 1983–84 fieldwork.
- (5) The term *gringo* is widely used in Perú and, in general, in South America to label non-Hispanic whites. However, the content of the term varies from country and from region to region, and may be applied to Hispanic whites who, for some reason or other, are conceived of as being foreign whites.
- (6) *Tío'* is the term of address corresponding to the kinship term of reference *nato'* = my grandfather.

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