

Moral Ambiguities and Competing Claims to Justice

Exploring the Dilemmas of Activist Scholarship and Intervention in Complex Situations

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The new cadre of “barefoot anthropologists” that I envision must become alarmists and shock-troopers-the producers of politically complicated and morally demanding texts and images capable of sinking through the layers of acceptance, complicity, and bad faith that allow the suffering and deaths to continue without even the pained cry of recognition of Conrad’s (1910) evil protagonist, Kurtz: “The horror! the horror! (Scheper-Hughes, 1995: 417)

The *Current Anthropology* paper from which this quotation is drawn provoked an especially ill-tempered response from some of the commentators. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, hardly a stranger to controversy, chose to make her argument in characteristically personal terms, drawing on her own experience of a black township in ‘The New South Africa’. Her argument that anthropologists ‘should be held accountable for what they see and what they fail to see, how they act or fail to act in critical situations’ (op.cit.: 437) was not a philosophical generalization. It was directed with little ambiguity at the majority of white South African anthropologists. Nor did she content herself with the idea that anthropologists as ‘witnesses’ rather than ‘spectators’ were ‘accountable to history’ rather than to ‘science’ (op.cit.: 419) for what they *wrote*. She insisted that taking an ethical stance should embrace *acting* and speaking *for* something in the situation of fieldwork, as she herself had done, first by taking a young recipient of ‘popular justice’ for hospital treatment and subsequently by addressing a township meeting on the subject of alternative forms of punishment. Although Scheper-Hughes was invited to speak (in order to explain her actions), she did so as a member of the ANC, in the expectation of reinforcing efforts by the ANC leadership to replace ‘necklacing’ and whippings with less severe forms of punishment.

In responding to her critics, Scheper-Hughes conceded it might have been better mannered for her to have made her argument using others rather than herself as exemplars of 'ethical anthropology'. There is perhaps something indelicate about critiquing others for 'self-absorbed reflexivity' whilst taking on the role of 'anthropologist as hero'. She also backtracked on the necessity for 'action', honouring the name of scholars whose 'morally engaged and politically committed' anthropology expressed itself through the academic text (op.cit.: 438). Yet some readers might have been left asking whether such concessions to academic civility did not, at the end of the day, weaken her argument. Did its power not indeed lie in the risks that she had taken personally in the name of 'morality' and her demand for anthropologists to be held accountable for their silences and lack of engagement? In her Brazilian research (Scheper-Hughes, 1992), she had been obliged to resume a career of militant partisanship, including campaigning for the Workers' Party candidate Lula in the 1989 elections, as the price of securing the cooperation of the women she wanted to study. Yet nothing had compelled her to continue to insist that chronic hunger had to remain at the foreground of any anthropological account of Bom Jesús de Mata or to point her finger so insistently at the pharmacists and doctors who, she argued, sought to efface its symptoms with tranquillisers and therefore failed in their ethical duty to heal. In her South African work, she made what might have been even more dangerous choices from the point of view of her personal safety, and used the outcome to make uncivil comments on the culture of her academic colleagues. Perhaps this *is* the price that needs to be paid for taking an 'ethical stance'?

The concrete implications of Scheper-Hughes's words and deeds in Brazil were, on her own admission, to make it impossible for her to enjoy civil relations with elite (and not so elite) members of the local society. Yet whatever academic consequences that might have had for her research, and however uncomfortable (or dangerous) it might have been at the time, in the field, it seems to be a condition that can be transcended by career success and professional life. After all, many anthropologists never revisit the places which form the basis for their successful monograph after the fieldwork period is over. Assuming, however, that fieldwork is survived without physical harm, taking the politics on to the stage of denouncing academic colleagues may also be relatively costless for those whose careers are established. Anthropologist-

activists who are 'barefoot' in terms of job security may, however, be in a less easy position, unless they encounter like-minded patrons. There is, therefore, an institutional side to all this which might inhibit the transformation of anthropology (or any other discipline) into a community of 'negative workers' "colluding with the powerless to identify their needs against the interests of the bourgeois institution: the university, the hospital, the factory" (Scheper-Hughes, 1995: 420). As Scheper-Hughes herself notes, a great many academics would prefer not to have their days disrupted by even verbal references to sick people and dying babies (let alone any more visceral experience). Yet even 'progressive' academics who do wish to hear about hunger and dying babies often have enough sense of self-interest and life-style maintenance to make their own contributions to the perpetuation of minor injustices closer to home - by tolerating casualization of academic labour and opposing attempts by the exploited to resist their condition, for example (DiGiacomo, 1997). Faced with the evidence of even our own narrow social worlds, we should perhaps start by being a little more questioning about the ease with which we can define 'an ethical stance'.

In *Death Without Weeping*, Scheper-Hughes is, of course, quite clear about that. The world is full of cruelty and everyday violence and this is the result of dominant people and institutions abusing the kind of people anthropologists habitually study. We should 'speak truth to power' and do what we can to undermine the power of the powerful and support the resistance of the resistant. In the case of her Brazilian work, Scheper-Hughes argues that women practise a 'morality of triage' in the social circumstances imposed on them (by elites) in the Alto de Cruzeiro, which she compares with a hospital ER or the 'space of death' in a battlefield or concentration camp. We should not deny the "disparate voices and sensibilities" of these women (by universalizing western psychological theory, for example), but we should, at the end of the day, try to create a world in which women do not have to let babies die. Indeed, in conducting research here, Scheper-Hughes both had problems with *maintaining* a cultural relativist position - in the sense that she herself *acted* against the grain of local practices - and found that cultural relativism simply wasn't *good enough* even from the point of view of enabling her to understand why people did what they did in a way that enabled her to *empathize* with them.

I tend to agree with Scheper-Hughes that the world of 'the madness of hunger' needs to get a little closer to the foreground of our appreciation of what it might mean to be at the bottom of global society. The problem is, however, that ethics are not a simple business. The link between ethics and action/intervention is more complex still. In the argument that follows, I do not intend to take the way out that seems to appeal to many in academic life: to separate 'scientific' endeavour from 'personal commitment', arguing that 'activism' is an individual choice far beyond what may be demanded in the name of 'professional' ethics and responsibility. I will, however, take up the issue raised by D'Andrade, Scheper-Hughes's chief interlocutor in the *Current Anthropology* debate, who argued that 'moral positions' get in the way of 'scientific' work, and Crapanzano's observation, in one of the commentaries, that any unity of practice in a discipline would be likely to reflect 'an administratively driven economy of knowledge'. My conclusion is that *how* we take an ethical stance, and the *grounds* on which we take it, matter, and that an ethical stance that is totalizing and non-situational is lacking in responsibility.

Although I will speak throughout as a professional anthropologist, I hope that the issues that I raise are seen as of broader relevance. In a previous essay on human rights issues (Gledhill, 1997), I discussed some of the difficulties in Rawlsian liberalism's efforts to produce an account of how political institutions could realize 'justice and fairness' that did not rest on subscription to any particular 'comprehensive idea of the good'. What Rawls (despite his undeniable good intentions) leaves us with is either a reliance on moral intuition or (as I suggested) a residual ethnocentrism based on an implicit theory of the inevitable historical transcendence of certain 'forms of life'. Rawls thus solves the problem of ethics by refusing to discuss ethics in any substantive way (beyond an appeal to history's onward march as a sociological fact). Scheper-Hughes, for her part, is forced to ground her own argument for 'the primacy of the ethical' in the idea that "responsibility, accountability, answerability to 'the other' is pre-cultural, in the sense that morality enables us to judge culture. Since judgements about 'culture' are clearly made within specific cultural worlds (by people who challenge or defend dominant practices), a simple-minded relativism about morality - this is the way that people in culture X think, so their conduct is unproblematic by their standards - clearly will not do. Yet it seems difficult to escape the conclusion that Scheper-Hughes invites us to share her moral

intuitions as a transcendent and essential 'womanly ethic of care and responsibility' (Scheper-Hughes, 1995: 419) without providing any very strong grounds for us to do so - from either philosophy or anthropology.

Caring and Acting

Why should 'we' care about 'others' whom we will never meet and whose sufferings may ultimately either be to our material benefit (as a factor in the world market price of sugar, say) or be of total irrelevance to our own lives? Is it simply that anthropologists do meet (some) of these 'others' and feel guilty that their sufferings may be the stuff on which careers are built? What is our moral pretext for highlighting the suffering other *in extremis*, as an image of 'the South' that erases other possible images just as surely as the silences for which Scheper-Hughes castigates anthropologists who write about other things? For Scheper-Hughes the answer is clearly that this is a human experience that is unbearable for her and should not be borne by her 'others'. Yet not silencing it is not the same as taking actions that might end it, which involve chains of causality and relationships far beyond the geographical locus of suffering itself. That raises further questions about the forms 'activism' and intervention should take.

People trained as anthropologists do, of course, sometimes chose to embrace practical solidarity with oppressed or disadvantaged people by working for UN agencies, NGOs or becoming freelance 'activists' of various kinds - sometimes acting as paid 'consultants', sometimes making a precarious living by various means that enable them to participate in projects of community development, education or social mobilization. Several Europeans with the latter kind of vocation were expelled from various regions of Mexico in the government clampdown that accompanied the tightening of counter-insurgency operations after the breakdown of negotiations with the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas in 1996. For most, this is as 'professional' an option as becoming an academic, and professionalism of any kind arguably involves compromise and constraint. Academics can sometimes have their cake and eat it, by practicing a close solidarity in moments of work abroad, and retreating to their studies to write at home, though many also strive to communicate to a broader public and may be able to engage in political work outside the university institution. But there are many forms of lower-key and more sporadic practice, such as acting as an

expert witness or helping migrants find their feet in an alien land, that have a less obviously 'militant' but not necessarily less useful quality. One might argue that remaining in academic life (which normally involves teaching as well as writing for scholarly or broader audience) is a choice of social role, and that the first concern of academics should be with issues of representation and their implications. Trying to persuade people to vote for Lula, joining a protest, or struggling to get an official to authorize more medicine for a shanty-town clinic, would on that view not be the core responsibility of a militant academic. The problem is, of course, that fieldwork situations do not always lend themselves to preserving a stance of non-involvement or ethical and political neutrality, as Scheper-Hughes stresses. This is why the kind of debates about who speaks for whom that take place in Cultural Studies do not fully resolve the multiple dilemmas of anthropologists who persist in trying to negotiate the more immediate and visceral contradictions encountered in fieldwork.

The issue of representation certainly needs to be taken seriously. Scheper-Hughes berates the image of the world presented by those such as Appadurai who celebrate the transcendence of borders and the flowering of hybrid cultures. She is clearly right to observe that borders remain really real for many people and Appadurai has produced some statements about the role of the United States in the world that many might find offensive and not a little naive. On the other hand, an anthropology that restricted itself exclusively to violence, horror and crisis would paint a somewhat distorted picture of contemporary human life, and especially so if it focused its attention on the South in a way that reproduced Northern prejudices and stereotypes, on the one hand, and absolved Northern society from critical scrutiny, on the other. Since anthropologists do often work in parts of the world where it could be argued that conditions of economic welfare and personal security have actually deteriorated in measurable ways in recent decades, we might expect some anthropologists to develop a special sensibility and consider the discipline to have a special responsibility to document and analyze these developments. Civil wars, communal violence and genocide, famine and other dramatic situations are pretexts for various forms of external intervention, by states and transnational non-governmental agencies. It is not unreasonable to assume that anthropologists can contribute knowledge that highlights the complex nature of many of these emergencies and can guide the forms of intervention appropriate

to securing desired outcomes. In part this work is also likely to become a battle over representation, with anthropologists challenging the stereotypes propagated by in the Northern media and by official discourses of crisis management. One part of this battle over representation is focused on the agency of the people of the South (rather than their victimhood) and the positive features of their past forms of life and continuing ability to shape new and distinct forms of life. Yet another part of the battle is actually focused on the wider scope of Northern intervention and responsibility for the situations in question - as in the anthropological critiques of the 'New Barbarism' account of Africa's problems (see, for example, Richards, 1996). Such a critique may range from the hypocrisy, bad faith and hidden agendas of Northern geo-political strategies to the more capillary consequences of what might be termed 'normal intervention' - which would include both the more subtle forms of transnational capitalist intervention associated with the biodiversity and human genome controversies (Escobar, 1998; Cunningham, 1998) *and* the very world of local NGO activism to which activist anthropologists are often drawn.

This suggests that a little reflexivity might be appropriate, and that reliance on a 'moral intuition' within the human bond between the anthropologists and her or his 'others' may be a cause for concern. Some would see the anthropologist, like the tourist, as a structurally neo-colonial phenomenon, irrespective of the individual's good intentions or politics (Bruner, 1989). Even if we assume that the bond forged between the anthropologist and her or his subjects can transcend their mutual social and cultural positioning, and that anthropology can ultimately be about *people* rather than 'bearers of cultures', it still seems important to try to stand back and ask ourselves where our sensibilities (or lack of sensibilities) come from and how they might correspond to developments in the world that we inhabit. In asking ourselves these questions, we might do worse than revisit what many of postmodern sensibility now regard as the dead issue of the 'progressiveness' of western history.

Moral Judgements and the Global Public Sphere

It might seem bizarre today for a 'militant anthropology' to follow Kathleen Gough's famous call of the Sixties to re-embrace the vision of the Enlightenment (Gough, 1968). As Eric Wolf noted in his final work, the Enlightenment's critics were not exactly wrong to suspect that the rule of Reason might be the means of

achieving more perfect domination, whilst rationalism, secularism and equality were the names under which Imperial France sought to assert its hegemony over Europe (Wolf, 1999: 64). There would, however, be something rather disturbing in an argument that anthropologists should embrace the counter-Enlightenment vision as it developed historically in Germany and is apparently replicated in many forms of contemporary communitarian politics throughout the world, including the Balkans (which have, of course, 'been there before'). As Isaiah Berlin observed in an essay on the enduring impact of 'the romantic revolution', the kind of subjectivism that lies at the heart of the romantic concept of the autonomous individual invites us to admire political projects that reflect self-realizing drives irrespective of their (unknowable) consequences (Berlin, 1996: 188). 'Do we truly believe', Berlin asks, 'that value judgements are not judgements at all, but arbitrary acts of self-commitment?' (op.cit.: 191) If we do, then anthropology and the other social sciences are 'irrelevant to political purposes and can instruct us only about ... techniques' (op.cit.: 192). In arguing, radically, that it may not be possible to find compromises between different value systems (and forms of life), and that the extinction of one by another could be admired for the manifestation of will (or racial destiny) that such an act embodied, the romantics also demonstrated the enormous destructive potential of a commitment to the transcendent value of a unique 'culture'.

As far as Wolf is concerned, economic globalization dominated by Northern neoliberal states has quite considerable capacity for inducing history to repeat itself:

Everywhere the exercise of public power is being challenged by rising claims of privatization, not only of property and service provision but also of means of violence. In many areas, armies are attempting to expand their economic and political influence, while paramilitary formations, private armies and security forces proliferate. Not infrequently, such groups enter into connections with "mafias," able to employ extralegal force in operations that can range from supplying the drug trade to clearing people off land to make it available for alternative uses. All such violence-prone situations favor the emergence of armed entrepreneurs who attract followers and build group solidarity through quasi-military styles of cohesion, preparedness and discipline. For such groups, the National Socialist syndrome continues to

furnish a ready prototype of ideas and modes of action, to be copied wholesale or varied according to circumstance. (Wolf, 1999: 273)

Here, then, Wolf makes connections between neoliberalism, capitalism and organized violence in which an essentializing kind of cultural politics can also play an important role (and may be 'anti-Western' in the same way as German Romanticism was 'anti-Enlightenment'). Yet it is difficult not to acknowledge some more positive tendencies. Whatever one thinks of NATO's intervention in the Kosovo situation and the use of a demonizing rhetoric against Milosevic to discount the human costs of the bombing campaign, the principle that the perpetrators of human rights abuse and intellectual authors of genocide should be made accountable to global justice (rather than 'history') should presumably not be rejected simply because it is applied unevenly (and in accordance with great power interests). Some of us might consider it appropriate for representatives of the United States government to appear in the dock alongside Pinochet, and might lament the fact that there are no global tribunals capable of addressing the continued prosecution of war against the innocent people of Iraq. But we live in an environment in which such questions can be, and are, raised in a public sphere that seems to be one of the products of a history in which North Atlantic hegemony continues to produce complex, contradictory, but evolving outcomes.

It might, of course, be a fundamental mistake to see the changing shape of our world solely as the product of a bourgeois liberal civilization rooted in 'western' culture. Bourgeois liberal civilization evolved in a complex relationship with the domination of colonial others and the creation of colonial societies (Turner, 1994; Stoler, 1995). The exclusionary qualities of its notions of citizenship and national belonging in relation to 'rights' reflect that history, which began by 'othering' lower social classes and insisting on their subjection to a 'cultural revolution' that was but the first of many projects of 'normalization' that continue up to today (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985). Europeans did not invent ethical accounts of governance, and the fact that Confucianism, for example, evidently does not replicate western liberal democratic theory does not make it (as a living, contested and interpreted tradition) incapable of addressing contemporary issues of public responsibility and political freedom. Western cultures are not the only cultures to have something to say about 'the individual'

either. Indeed, it is potentially illuminating to consider how models of personhood and individuality that are relational rather than individualistic might deal with the kinds of issues embraced by the discourse of human rights. In principle, the same processes of globalization that are producing the paramilitaries and cultural nationalists are also creating the conditions that can give rise to new forms of transnational identity and 'flexible citizenship' (Besserer, 1997; Ong, 1999). How the dialogues across cultural and political divides that the late modern condition provokes will turn out remains to be seen. In the face of more internal dissidence, Beijing may find it increasingly difficult to maintain that human rights doctrines are hopelessly enmeshed in western cultural presuppositions and a means of defending North Atlantic economic hegemony (Ong, op.cit.: 75). Furthermore, as far as Ong is concerned, even public discourses on the distinctiveness of 'Asian values' and other apparent expressions of 'rejection of the West' emerge in a competitive game which is played by 'the rules of neoliberal orthodoxy' and 'disguise common civilizational references in a world where the market is absolutely transcendental' (Ong, op.cit.: 7). It is true that actors within the Chinese diaspora may find it convenient to resort to strategic essentialisms. And the same may be true of popular social movements mobilizing a politics of identity and place to reconstitute livelihoods and geographical spaces against the incursions of transnational corporations that are becoming increasingly subtle in their own handling of national state and NGO intermediaries. Nevertheless, the conditions for productive continuing inter-cultural debate about rights, justice and freedom do seem to be as firmly entrenched as the forces that darken our world, turning honest citizens in 'undocumented migrants' evading the law, or the personal clients of drug lords.

It is, of course, wrong to talk as if whole 'cultures' were in dialogue, except in so far as alleged 'cultural traditions' become the subject of political discourses, since no culture is uniform and lacking in internal tensions, and no cultural system in history has ever been truly closed and bounded. As Gupta and Ferguson (1997) note, echoing Appadurai, anthropological representation can have the same effect as immigration law - construction of an otherness that 'spatially incarcerates the native' by consigning him or her to one of a differentiated series of places within a global system of domination. Although I share Scheper-Hughes's conviction that we should not ignore the extent to

which people are, if not incarcerated, then at least constrained and influenced in their projects by the continuing importance of national states, Appadurai's emphasis on 'the imagination' as an important factor in the politics of a world of mass communication may not be entirely misplaced (Appadurai, 1991). Nor is it something entirely new, at least in regions such as Latin America, as David Nugent has shown in analyzing how the middle strata of the impoverished and marginalized province of Chachapoyas, Peru, called on the emancipatory discourse of the European liberal world, imagined the modern state and demanded its presence in their lives in order to rid them of the arbitrary and violent rule of a regional elite that sought to prolong the socio-racial hierarchy of caste society into the twentieth century (Nugent, 1997).

The difficulty for the anthropologist seeking to give 'primacy to the ethical' is where to stand in this cacophony of voices. We do not wish to be neo-colonialists and 'inter-cultural dialogue' is often the very aim of anthropological research (though it may fail): one of the tasks of anthropology is to demonstrate that western ways of understanding and acting on the world are not universal and not necessarily 'better'. I very much doubt that anthropologists would wish to follow Richard Rorty's recent (1998) insistence that our task is to promote 'progressive' politics within national units which represent not only the only truly viable arena of effective political action but also our primary domain of ethical responsibility. In addition to marginalizing all those whose membership of nation states has become problematic, Rorty's perspective assumes that the achievement of greater social justice in North America would create a state yet more fitted to fulfil the role of the world's policeman and chooses to ignore all those problems that the defence of the affluence and 'integrity' of even a kinder and more caring America might still pose for the rest of the world. The problem is, perhaps, that 'speaking truth to power', especially in a deconstructionist genre, is considerably easier than determining 'a comprehensive conception of the good' relevant to a given social and cultural setting. Even the 'West' itself has been and continues to be the site of profound struggles over the most fundamental questions of the rights of individuals, the proper relationships between citizens, nations and states, the very conceptions of belonging and membership that define national and personal identities, and liberal versus communitarian-essentialist and organicist principles. Ethnography does not provide answers to ethical questions, though it may suggest new ways of

looking at them. The alternatives may be stark: either we restrict our ethical concerns to our own professional practice - in doing fieldwork, for example, though this is itself far from unproblematic when it comes to policing accepted ethical practice - or we look for ways of grounding a substantive ethical and political position.

The discourse of universal human rights has something of a defensive quality. It defends the body from ill-treatment, calls for an end to discrimination, asserts that governance must not be arbitrary and unpredictable, and seeks to guarantee a minimum of material human welfare. If not precisely a child of western liberalism, its affinity with that tradition is evident in both its virtues and its defects, the majority of which have survived the attempt to introduce modifications to accommodate differing cultural sensibilities and respect for difference in terms of rights to cultural survival. The link which western liberalism made between freedom to enjoy private property rights and individual freedom is, if anything, proving increasingly vexatious in an age where personal worth is measured through the symbolic value of consumption and the exercise of formal political rights often ceases to be linked to a project of emancipation. Yet even if it originated in an era where freedom as 'property of the person' was being extended as a formal legal condition to people who were being enslaved in new ways, the liberal concept of individual freedom has always resonated in an ambiguous way with the specific aspirations of an age. The 'people' of Chachapoyas wanted freedom from boss rule, but those who articulated this cry for freedom linked the idea of (pre-capitalist) social autonomy and dignity to a model of masculinity in a way that hardly put their region at the forefront of the struggle for the emancipation of women. In an age in which Latin American feminisms are more visible, many social movements crossing class and ethnic divides have experienced some difficulties in moving beyond 'agreeing to differ' on matters beyond rights to be spared domestic abuse and rape (Stephen, 1997), but anthropologist-activists drawn to the study of such movements are unlikely to be committed pro-lifers. The power of the liberal tradition of individual rights as a means of grounding ethical judgement is the way that it legitimates the individual as a responsible moral agent, able to make choices against the grain of convention. There is, of course, the rider that such choices should not harm others and that 'society' has the right to determine what behaviour or action constitutes such harm. Subject to the pressure of peers

and holders of power in his or her social environment, not to mention the constraints of life-circumstances, individuals may not, at the end of the day, be exercising the kind of idealized autonomy liberal doctrines presuppose. As Sherry Ortner has pointed out, in criticizing an interpretation of some apparent subaltern acts of resistance as symbolic gestures pregnant with meaning, the determinants of behaviour may be far more mundane and coercive even where the agent in question appears to be exercising considerable 'agency' (Ortner, 1995).

This could be taken as a lesson that anthropologists, as social scientists, should dedicate themselves to studying how moral positions are shaped and reshaped in social practice, negotiation and conflict in ethnographic situations, rather than study and write from an ethical perspective that can only be grounded on transcultural terrain. Yet that is perhaps again to assume that there *is* a singular cultural answer to any substantive ethical dilemma, rather than a universally contested and negotiated moral domain in which different answers may be supplied in any culture. As one of many agents crossing the fluid boundaries of cultures and communities, anthropologists tend habitually to be drawn into these debates, especially in crisis circumstances, and may have to navigate the choppy waters of moral ambiguity (our own and *theirs*) more frequently than we care to admit. At this point, I will turn ethnographic.

The Moral Ambiguity of Situations: In Search of a 'Good Enough' Ethics

Let me begin this final stage of my argument with a story about angel-babies, a crucial issue in Scheper-Hughes's Brazilian ethnography, since the crux of her argument was that women in the Alto de Cruzeiro had to be taken at their word when they said that they did not grieve for the dead infants and that, contrary to the universalizing claims of western psychology about 'denial' and selves divided between public states and real 'inner states', this was because their 'culture', shaped by their conditions of life, taught them 'how to feel'. The idea that small babies that die become angels is common to all Latin American Catholic cultures, but there are some distinctive features of how deaths are handled in Alto de Cruzeiro. There is only a perfunctory reutilization of the wake and burial, and children play an important role in burying the babies - so infant death is part of *child* socialization. Scheper-Hughes argues that normally this 'works', though her ethnography does indicate that it works with tension,

not only in the case of an occasional child who cries, but in the case of mature women who display 'inappropriate' emotions in recalling the dead and are scolded by other women for doing so. Her argument here is, in effect, that 'abstract' and universal moral principles are something that these women cannot afford, and that the way the women are portrayed by more affluent local families, from a stance of moral superiority that does appeal to different values, is essentially a hypocrisy which not only fails to register the distinct voices and sensibilities of subalterns, but is complicit in maintaining their suffering. In this account, we are presented with some evidence, reading between the lines, of sensibilities that are subject to stress and tension, but largely conditioned towards uniformity by circumstances, and we are given less insight into the moral universe of the elites, because the ethnographer has made up her mind about them.

The world is not always that simple. In 1982, I was asked to take a photograph of an *angelito* in a village in Michoacán state, Mexico, by his mother. The child had toddled out behind a reversing truck, and been crushed to death. Making him look like an angel at peace with God was difficult because of his injuries, but careful arrangement of flower petals achieved a passable effect if one didn't peer too closely. In this region, people are less hungry than in Alto de Cruzeiro, but most women still lose some children. The angel wake and burial are more elaborate and there is normally a muted display of grief, though it is tempered by the idea that the sinless child has gone straight to heaven. This was, however, an exceptional case. The mother was the youngest daughter of the man who had been the richest peasant in the community and a local boss (*cacique*). His wife, Cruz, had had 21 births, of which 14 children survived to maturity. The daughter who was the mother of this child had married for love, against the advice of her family, to a land-less field-hand who worked for one of her rich brothers. This was their first and so far only child, in an era when people had come to the conclusion that two or three children was plenty. The truck belonged to the rich brother but was being driven by her husband's brother. He was hysterical with guilt as well as grief, but there was, of course, another element in the situation, because the instrument of the child's death was the truck, which symbolized the wealth of other members of the family. What everyone was thinking (but no one actually said at the time) was that it was so unfair that the rich brother had taken away the one thing his poor sister had, the

child of her love. It was also generally considered that the fact that the father's brother had actually been behind the wheel just added to the moral culpability of the better off part of the family - they were held responsible for the event that would now haunt him for the rest of his life. The rich brother himself did, in fact, feel guilty and, unusually for him, later took to drinking.

So there, in this tragically contingent event, a whole range of moral issues were unexpectedly exposed. They included issues to do with social inequality - how some peasants became richer than others. In this case the 'objective' answer would have to make some reference to the transformation of the political economy of the zone after land reform, which created a new agrarian bourgeoisie outside the land reform communities which needed to find 'insiders' able to mediate their difficult relations with discontented (and armed) peasants. In terms of local values, however, the former *cacique* was himself a morally ambiguous figure. People told stereotypical stories about finding gold under floorboards of a house rented from a poor widow, cheating a previous *patrón* who was illiterate and a whole repertoire of other tales that I had heard told in many other places about many other people who had been able to pull their way out of poverty. What had actually made him so successful was that he was a brilliant manager of personal clientship relations, able to foster the idea that he was, after all, a good *patrón* who looked after people and was, within the limits set by his private self-aggrandizement, caring and socially responsible. It was almost inevitable that none of the sons who succeeded him could quite match either the charisma or the authority of the father: the one who was best at business was, unfortunately, the least successful in terms of human relations (and the subsequent history of his children, a generation away from the social capital bequeathed by their grandfather, later proved tragic and violent).

Another issue raised by the child's death touched on family responsibilities and whether people had fulfilled them. The normal cultural process for dealing with infant death was of only limited help in containing the whole scenario that made this an abnormal event, and simply failed to tell all the parties involved how and what to feel. Furthermore, although the trigger was a specific tragedy, its moral dimensions were observable across a gamut of tensions and conflicts in everyday life. Here too, however, we see some of the limits of Schepers-Hughes's approach to the question of inequality and the role of power relations in shaping the terrain of morality.

Firstly, it is of immense importance for understanding the political and social history of the region in question to appreciate how people related to each other across class divisions within rural communities and in the larger social universe. Caught between an intensely conservative Catholicism and a disappointing experience of revolutionary land reform, driven to cross-border migration and socially and culturally transformed in the process, the local peasantry had considerable difficulty deciding who to blame for their problems and in the fullness of time veered in a number of radically different political directions, yet have lived from 1940 to the present with morally ambivalent ideas about 'exploitation' and 'patronage'. It would not, in this case, be adequate to focus simply on the pragmatic dimensions of these relationships between patrons and clients, not only because this would not help us to link behaviour to attitudes, but because the people themselves worry in a quite spontaneous and self-reflexive way about the apparent contradictions of their feelings. Economic sociologists have provided us with some useful insights into how the definition of both 'moral' and 'amoral' behaviour and its relationship to stability and conflict is related to the structure of social relationships in concrete settings, striving to mediate the extremes of an 'oversocialized' approach in which human beings are automata performing the norms of their culture and the 'undersocialized' approach of methodological individualism based on the rational actor (Granovetter, 1990). Yet the problem of ambiguity seems to escape any approach in which structure is privileged over the unfolding flow of social life.

Secondly, the assumption that the morality of elites is simply hypocrisy is somewhat dangerous. As one ascends the pyramid of the social stratification system of Latin American societies, especially in an age of hyper-urbanization, one rapidly approaches a point at which elite understandings of the people towards the bottom of the social ladder become stereotypical (and quite false with regard to their actual social practice in the most mundane of senses). This is, in fact, sometimes a problem for anthropologists, who are by and large recruited from the upper echelons and may have to unlearn even more prejudices than their foreign colleagues. It would, however, be inappropriate to assume that there is no historical synergy between these levels in the production of moral understandings, even if these are of a contested nature - indeed, the history of postrevolutionary Mexico suggests that official national culture has

been modified in important ways by contestation from below, as well as supplying some of the categories that have shaped the course and path of that contestation. It would also be a mistake to assume that elites are homogeneous and that there is no moral contestation within them - Mexico may have become an independent country to rescue the Church from secular reformers in Spain, but even the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a 'social Catholicism' alongside the conservative forms dominant in western Mexico, and this was not simply a pragmatic response to the rise of liberalism and socialism but was grounded in a genuine difference of moral orientation. It would also be unwise to ignore the strong sense of moral conviction that can accompany the defence of a religious order of things, at both the top and the bottom of a society. For elites what is at stake is not simply material privilege, but a whole form of life, and to see this as simply self-interested egotism is, at least in some contexts, a major barrier to understanding why elites sometimes do not embark on apparently sensible reforms that might, in the long term, have provided them with better guarantees of survival.

But a more fundamental problem is that 'societies' like this are not simply layered into hierarchically ordered homogeneous strata. In the community that I used as my first example, families that were in equivalent socio-economic circumstances in the 1980s remained divided by various legacies of history: these included the role their forebears had played in the days when the region was a vast landed estate, in a workforce which had its own systems of social distinction, still reproduced through marriage patterns long after the reform, and even more important, the subsequent histories of confrontation between secularizing land reformers and supporters of the old regime who had been mobilized by the Catholic *sinarquista* movement, the Mexican version of Fascism. In a local history in which identities had been further complicated by individually variable histories of international migration, micro-differences in socio-economic terms could carry enormous moral loads and impede everyday sociality in all kinds of unexpected ways. Furthermore, it would be difficult for an outsider equipped with knowledge of the tangled history of land reform to make easy judgements about which actors had occupied the moral high ground and how differences might best be reconciled. Again, there would be a substantial gap between what might be done in terms of 'speaking truth to power' at a regional, national and international level and charting a course of

justice and fairness as a concrete solution to the accumulated problems of decades. For example, the rules designed to ensure justice and fairness in the allocation of 'land to the tiller' had been widely perverted and abused over a thirty year period, but the outcomes were complex, and relatively poor as well as relatively rich people could be found in illegal possession of land. People who did not possess any land at all might remark on the injustice of this situation, but if they did not have the land themselves, they would prefer those who did have it to be the more commercially successful farmers who could offer them work. Furthermore, it was quite difficult to see people who had actually succeeded in becoming small commercial farmers as an 'anomaly' in terms of the expressed goals of land reform (even if they had illegally bought land with migrant earnings or a public sector salary), since their semi-proletarianized poorer *compañeros* were neither making a living from the land nor producing the food the country so urgently needed to reduce its import bill.

Rather than pursue this case further, let me turn instead to the contemporary situation in Chiapas state, which is an even better illustration of the kind of complexity a 'militant anthropology' needs to address. Chiapas is a paradigmatic case of a 'no easy options' scenario, for reasons I have explored in more depth elsewhere (Gledhill, forthcoming). Since the initial ploy of blaming the EZLN rebellion of 1994 on 'outside agitators' ceased to be sustainable, it has proved highly convenient to the federal government in Mexico City to represent Chiapas as a backward place where the land reform never happened and a regional elite has managed to go its own way, much to the regret of successive administrations. 'Speaking truth to power' here would force us to note that the upper echelons of the Chiapaneco elite have been fully cooperating with national economic 'modernization' projects since the revolution, that a great many of the leading figures from that elite have held national office in the government and the military, that many of the region's agrarian problems are the result of national economic policies, and that all transformations and reconfigurations of regional power structures since the 1930s have reflected the increasing penetration of federal institutions and the global economy (Viqueira, 1999; Ascencio, 1998). Our main problem is, however, that the Zapatista uprising has so captured the imaginations of both Mexican and foreign intellectuals, and a global public receptive to the claims for justice of marginalized and brutalized 'Indians', that understanding of the complexities of the Chiapas situation

remains at a remarkably low ebb, despite the efforts of the few anthropologists who have dedicated themselves to the long-term ethnographic study of the communities in the 'zone of conflict' in the Selva Lacandona and placed the Zapatista movement in a wider context which includes other peasant organizations and other social and political actors (see, for example, Leyva, 1995; Leyva and Ascencio, 1996).

Many of the apparently peculiar features of the Zapatista movement relate to its original setting, in multi-ethnic communities formed by colonization of the forest region, principally by former plantation workers. Like other indigenous movements in Latin America, its formative years were related to the emergence of lay catechists sponsored by the Liberation Theology-orientated diocese of San Cristóbal under Bishop Ruíz, but this was not the only factor, since an indigenous leadership had been schooled in a broadly-based peasant organization which incorporated all the communities of the zone, the Unión de Uniones (Leyva, 1995). Although I am prepared to follow Gary Gossen (1999) in arguing that the anonymous style of this leadership (and its use of the conspicuously non-Indian Marcos as a public face) is a reflection of its roots in a Maya 'deep culture' that still pervades the practice of community life, it is generally more useful to contrast the EZLN base communities with their highland counterparts in terms of social and political organization. Thanks in part to the tactical errors of the EZLN itself, many of those communities remain in the hands of bosses loyal to the ruling party. The most striking case is the municipio of San Juan Chamula. The epitome of an essentialist form of indigenous cultural politics, and the closest approximation found ethnographically to Eric Wolf's ideal-type of the 'closed corporate community', Chamula binds the elements of its diaspora which have not been expelled for rejecting the rule of the Chamula oligarchy by converting to Protestantism firmly to the ritual cycle of a ceremonial centre which proclaims its ultimate contempt for the ladino at the cost of severe internal inequality and an unconditional loyalty to the ladino state. Chamula is not the kind of place where uncompromising 'militant anthropologists' would find it very easy to survive a period of fieldwork.

As an indigenous rights project, the Zapatista movement belongs to the other end of the spectrum, as Lynn Stephen has argued (Stephen, 1998). In many ways, I would see it as having made a crucial effort to deconstruct the kind of

divisions between Indians and non-Indians on which official ideologies associating national identity with race-mixing (*mestizaje*) are based. This is a non-essentialist type of movement which strives to make boundaries permeable, appeals to common popular nationalist symbols, and strives to take its place in a 'rainbow coalition' of diverse urban and rural movements (including *indigenous* movements in cities). Yet it has faced an uphill struggle in advancing this programme for a variety of reasons. One is the fact that not all indigenous communities in Chiapas have the same kinds of organization as the Zapatista base communities, and have reacted in a variety of ways to the forces of economic 'modernization' and globalization. In the case of Amatenango del Valle, studied over a period of years by June Nash, the tensions of change have mainly been projected inwards, with sanguinary consequences (Nash, 1994). Other communities, despite internal divisions, have embraced a politics of seeking 'development' through joining organizations orientated to production rather than agrarian reform politics (following the lead of the neoliberal state). Many pursued campaigns for reform of municipal government and against the bosses associated with the ruling party. In this complex panorama of alternative projects, many organized indigenous peasant groups rejected the Zapatista call for an armed uprising, but still sympathized with the Zapatista cause. Yet the Zapatistas refused to cooperate with the electoral ambitions of the PRD, the centre-left party to which some other militant organizations turned in their struggles for reform of local government, and when their sympathizers abstained, handed power back to the bosses, thus contributing to an escalating cycle of community violence (Viqueira, op.cit.).

This in itself would have impeded the prospects for a successful campaign to transform Chiapas and the country, but the government's determination to pursue a low intensity war by stealth has further complicated the scenario. Chiapas is not, contrary to popular stereotypes, a place entirely dominated by large landed estates. After the first government negotiator, Manuel Camacho Solis, appeared to give the green light to further land reform (as an exception to the constitutional changes introduced by the Salinas government in 1992, on the grounds that earlier land reform decrees had not been implemented), a very large number of spontaneous land seizures took place, especially in the northern regions of the state (away from the Zapatista heartlands). Some of these related to longstanding disputes between communities and large land-holders that had

endured for centuries (though some of the landowners themselves were the 'new rich' of the neoliberal era and members of the national/transnational Mexican elite). But many others involved small landowners, small-scale commercial ranchers who felt little social affinity with the great families of the state and could be seen as the lineal descendants of the 'Mapache' rebels of 1914, small proprietors from marginal zones beyond the central valley who had been left behind in the race for economic 'modernization' on which the leaders of the Chiapaneco oligarchy had so enthusiastically embarked and felt that they faced immediate ruin were 'progressive' labour laws to be implemented (Benjamin, 1995). Some of the victims were simply ladino peasants with a few hectares. In a move which expresses both the cunning and the cynicism of Mexico's ruling circle, state troopers intervened subsequently to expel invaders from large properties but left the smaller properties under occupation. Leaked military documents indicate that the policy was deliberate, designed to enlist *ranchero* support for a paramilitary 'third force' campaign of terror that was also planned from the early days after the rebellion (*Proceso* 1105, 4th January, 1998). At their best, *ranchero*-Indian relations in Chiapas tend to be based on a racist paternalism, but their 'reaction' is now spurred by a double feeling of moral indignation: they are victimized by a global economy that is making their futures increasingly tenuous and by violation of the private property rights guaranteed to them by the Mexican revolutionary settlement and strengthened by neoliberal 'reform'.

The leading paramilitary organizations are organized by politicians of the ruling party and registered as 'social development organizations', which entitles them to federal funding. They recruit footsoldiers from the young and land-less poor, who seize the chance to dignify themselves and express their masculinity by carrying a modern weapon, achieving an authority denied them in 'traditional' community institutions and land reform communities alike. They are now active throughout Chiapas, including in some of the communities of the Selva itself. Completely encircled by a grid of military roads and subject to constant surveillance, most of the Zapatista base communities succeeded in keeping the soldiers at arm's length from 1996 until the summer of 1999, when the army began to enter Zapatista base communities that had previously been left alone and blocked access to human rights NGOs and the press. Yet even before the government resumed a more aggressive course, the counter-

insurgency campaign had brought substantial changes, breaking the old patterns of uniformity and solidarity that characterized the days of the Unión de Uniones. Internal dissent regarding the Zapatista strategy increased, prompting some communities to expel dissidents (as they also did in the run-up to the rebellion, in this sense at least replicating the patterns of Highland communities). Others secured an uneasy system of co-governance involving different factions, though this largely paralyzed the decision-making process based on communal consensus. Tensions between communities have been exacerbated as paramilitary groups have formed, and the Selva also has an unusually high proportion of Protestant converts. The military have not been slow to seek to exploit these divisions, and in some cases there are complaints that military commanders have even resorted to handing out supplies of marijuana in an attempt to buy the demobilization of young men and disrupt community authority structures further. Even without the drugs dimension, an increasingly important part of Chiapaneco reality and even popular culture, the mere presence of so many soldiers as consumers of every kind of commodity and sexual services has transformed the life of much of the region, dragged into the *Apocalypse Now* model of global transformation. This is not to say that popular support for the EZLN has disappeared, nor that the EZLN no longer has the potential to impact on Mexican politics — the government did not seek to prevent Zapatista militants from conducting another ‘popular consultation’ on indigenous rights earlier this year, in which some three million Mexicans participated. But it is to reinforce the point that the EZLN has not, and probably never will, be able to speak for Chiapaneco ‘peasants’ as a whole, and is struggling even to defend its position in the Selva Lacandona heartlands of the movement.

There are many aspects of the EZLN rebellion that made it particularly appealing to outsiders, and the movement has always sought to cultivate its image to its sympathetic ‘others’ by a controlled expression of alterity and universality. This has undoubtedly saved lives (though other aspects of EZLN strategy, in particular its demands for electoral abstention, have also cost lives). Yet it is to be lamented that the EZLN has attracted attention denied to other movements in the region, and that there is no simple perspective on the moral high ground here. In the immediate case of the Selva Lacandona, ecological pressures were undoubtedly increased by the quite cynical creation of a massive

bioreserve as a cover for logging (also justified in the name of 'protecting' the tiny population of 'exotic' Lacandón Indians, merged into nature along with the flora and fauna). Yet the tropical soils of the Selva are thin, and extensive cattle raising by the communities has already done substantial damage. To dream of an agrarian paradise in this beautiful but unhealthy and already overpopulated Eden is a fantasy. The EZLN strategy has, however, always had the merit of seeing that different solutions are appropriate and necessary for different kinds of Mexicans, at least in principle. For the state, the movement has a threatening quality not simply because it ties demands for resources to demands for respect for cultural difference and its legal recognition, but because its cultural politics, very much a politics willing to accommodate and celebrate hybridity, menaces a 'bottom-up' reworking of popular identities of a non-exclusive kind. States have little difficulty conceding demands for purely cultural rights, and Mexico's state has, in fact, given generous financial support to some indigenous organizations with this orientation. But the way identities are politicized in the Zapatista project in terms of calls for sweeping social transformation is something quite different from that.

So a combination of military roads and increasingly sophisticated strategies of division will probably be used to continue to inhibit the reconciliation of competing popular political programmes in Chiapas, and the wounded sentiments of the *rancheros* will continue to be cultivated as a resentment towards Indians who have refused to keep in their place. We can speak truth to power about these things, and might even try to convince *rancheros* that they suffer from misrecognition of their situation. Yet it is clear that everyone, from the *rancheros* to the paramilitary footsoldiers, sees themselves as suffering a deficit of justice, and can ground their claims to justice by appealing to a variety of principles. As I pointed out in earlier work (Gledhill, 1997), not all these principles can easily be reconciled. The PRD supporters hope, for example, that genuinely free and fair secret ballot elections will enable them to dislodge the bosses. The Zapatistas associate indigenous autonomy with the right to select representatives and reach decisions by community consensus (even where this violates the rights of individuals by forcing them to leave their homes and land).

I agree (for once) with Richard Rorty when he argues that a rhetoric of 'no piecemeal solutions' is out of place in the modern world, especially in situations such as this (Nystrom and Puckett, 1998: 46). Piecemeal solutions are exactly

what is needed to promote the kind of reconciliation between factions, interests and visions of the good and just that could produce agreed and viable concrete proposals for ameliorating the lives of Chiapanecos in particular and Mexicans in general. The most an anthropologist can do (beside possibly mediate in small spaces of social intimacy) is perhaps analyze and denounce the conditions that militate against reconciliation. But if my analysis is correct, then this means going against the positions adopted by the majority of 'militant scholars' on the conflict, which have privileged the Zapatista movement to the almost total exclusion of movements for civic rights and other independent peasant organizations that opposed the use of violence or wished to prioritize other demands. What we may need is perhaps not so much a 'good enough ethnography' (as argued by Scheper-Hughes, 1995: 417-18) but a 'good enough' ethics that can be generous in the range of those to whom it affords recognition.

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