

LE REGARD ÉLOIGNÉ

FROM THE NATIVE POINT OF VIEW.  
REPRESENTATIONS OF CENTRAL ITALY IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL DISCOURSE \*

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**1. A field full of texts**

As a consequence of the so-called post-modern debate about the conditions of ethnographic authority and the relationship between field experience and strategies of textual representation, anthropology seems divided into two fiercely opposing factions: on one side, those who enthusiastically adhered to the deconstructionist and hermeneutic revolution; on the other, those who resist in defence of the scientific and objective entrenchments of the discipline.

This frontal opposition does not seem to be either very interesting or profitable; and it is natural for the two parties to try to recuperate a common ground on which some discussion (apart from insulting one another) is possible. G. Saunders [1995: 23] refers that on the occasion of the last annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, scholars such as Marvin Harris and George Marcus were at least invited to sit at the same table - even though he is vague about the results. It also seems that many people at the congress expressed their concern about the fact that an excessive self-criticism might discredit anthropology in the eyes of wider public opinion, of other disciplines and mostly in the eyes of the institutions that grant funds. Here in Italy, funds are so poor that we can afford to talk freely. The problem is not so much that of finding a common ground of compromise between the "positivists" and the "interpretives", as the two parties are usually defined; the point is to recognize, among the problems raised by the "post-modern"

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debate, those which are real and urgent with regard to the whole discipline, and those which can instead be left to doctrinaire disputes and philosophical options.

I would here like to discuss one of the problems which I do consider to be real and urgent, no matter which of the two sides you decide to favour. Anthropologists, so attentive to "contexts" because of a disciplinary vocation, cannot possibly deny that their own knowledge (like any other) is being produced within a context - that is, in a certain historical, social, and cultural determination of the world. Likewise, anthropologists should also realize that this empirical context is highly interwoven with the epistemological structure of the discipline. For instance, classical anthropology was born in a world context characterized by imperialism, by a wide geographical and communicative distance between Western and exotic countries, by a clear social characterization of the anthropologist himself (invariably belonging to the upper classes of Western countries). What happens when this context changes? Are there correlative changes in the epistemological constitution of the discipline? Which are the consequences of the new relationships between the West and the Rest, of the world shrinking because of "global communication", of the ever increasing difficulty in distinguishing between the subject and the object of the anthropological knowledge?

In his most recent book, Clifford Geertz analyzes some of these changes which have occurred in the practical conditions of ethnographic work. First of all, he says,

...ethnographic work is now almost never undertaken in places where other sorts of scholars are not present, or at least nearby: historians, economists, philologists, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, art fanciers, film-makers, musicologists, even now and then a philosopher or two. And journalists, of course, are everywhere. The days when ethnographers were intellectual masters of all they surveyed from child raising and trade to cosmology and housebuilding, if only because they were about the only people who went to such places to study such things, are long gone [Geertz 1995: 132].

Secondly, not all anthropologists are Westerners, and the character of the "native anthropologist" enters on stage:

Not only is there usually a significant contingent of local anthropologists [...], but even in the West the profession is no longer a monopoly of Americans and Europeans [...] The critical gaze from neighbouring disciplines is supplemented by a similar gaze, even more searching, from within our own [Ibid.: 132].

Thirdly, the number of anthropologists has become and is becoming greater and greater:

...in 1950, there were about two thousand members of the American Anthropological Association; by 1992 there were well over ten thousand, and the end

is not in sight. If one were to measure, as I have not the heart to do, the rate of publication and the subjects covered, the contrast would be even more alarming. Once a guild occupation, comparing itself alternatively to a tribe, a craft, or a social club, anthropology has become a sprawling consortium of dissimilar scholars held together largely by will and convenience [Ibid.: 132-33].

It is clear how these elements challenge the foundations that legitimated classical anthropological practice, and on which "ethnographic authority" - as we are used to calling it following James Clifford - was built. The classical anthropologist speaks from the point of view of an exclusive knowledge of *his* people, of *his* tribe, of *his* small part of the world. He saves a traditional culture from disappearing by giving a representation of it that nobody else is capable of offering. It must be remembered, e.g., that Malinowski discouraged ethnographic "duplicates" (doing fieldwork with cultural groups already "done" by other scholars) by advocating a research organization where each culture to be "rescued" corresponded to one, and only one, ethnographer.

Furthermore, in the classical ethnographic situation there is no other Western knowledge which is exerted on local exotic realities: possible alternative sources of knowledge (e.g., linguistic repertoires of the missionaries, travellers' reports and so on) are considered to be un-scientific and therefore auxiliary and subordinated to anthropological knowledge. Classical anthropology was working with a concept of culture that had not yet become common sense. Its objects of study, in a sense, were not interesting for any other science. It was an avant-garde discipline and it certainly had no competitors in its way (significantly, it was only through the mediation of artistic and literary avant-gardes that anthropology managed to obtain a wider space in the culture of the twentieth century). Still more importantly: research methods created by the main schools, like Malinowskian fieldwork and participant-observation, were linked to a typical situation of the anthropologist's intellectual and physical isolation. These methods assume the total absence of any previous knowledge about a particular culture, let alone the possibility for the natives to represent themselves, to directly speak for themselves in the face of the West.

Presuppositions of this kind are no longer the basis of contemporary anthropological practice. Indeed, they have never worked as bases of the so-called anthropology of "modern" or "complex" societies. In fact, the very idea of an anthropology studying "us" rather than "them" has always been an epistemological anomaly for the discipline - not so much because of the "complexity" of the object, but because it assumes a radically different relationship between subject and object, an entirely different kind of "ethnographic encounter". Studying his own

culture, the researcher always finds himself in the situation described by Geertz: that is to say, in a field that is already full of self-representations of the natives, already occupied by the knowledge of other disciplines and of native anthropologists. He does not possess exclusive rights to his subject, and this makes the creation of ethnographic authority a much more difficult matter.

A history of anthropology seen from the point of view of the strategies of ethnographic authority still has to be written (notwithstanding the intriguing hints and suggestions coming from the *Writing Culture* movement). What I would like to suggest is that the representational and textual strategies of contemporary anthropology - including anthropology of complex societies - often reproduce models which were built in the classical situation. In other words, there is a sort of rhetorical delay in anthropological production that prevents it from adapting to the new and changing qualities of ethnographic encounters. It is the very realization of so great a delay, indeed, that inspires to the so-called experimental ethnographies advocated by "post-modern" scholars like George Marcus (see the celebrated textbook *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* [Marcus & Fischer 1986]).

In what follows, I try to analyse the authoritative strategies that give shape to cultural representations of Italy (and Tuscany in particular) by researchers coming from other countries. As a "native anthropologist" - I was in fact born in Tuscany and live there - this literature seems to me to be a good observatory for the kind of problems raised above. Reading anthropological studies about one own's home always stirs up strange impressions: we are forced to mobilize, at the same time, both our competence as readers of anthropological material and our cultural competence as natives. Quite often the result is ambiguous. We can't escape a feeling of distortion, of simplification: familiar things are described in a way that seems unacceptable to an inner view. On the other hand, however, we sometimes also have the impression of an opening to new, intriguing and enlightening perspectives that can be achieved only by a view from the outside. But most of all, such reading can help us understanding how ethnographic representation works - how it manages to reduce an endlessly complex continuum to a single and clarifying model.

What I would like to point out here are the distorting effects of using classical anthropological strategies in the representation of us as natives by anthropologists coming from outside. In particular, I would like to stress the limits of ethnographies that represent us on the basis of unsustainable epistemological presuppositions; that is to say, rhetorically assuming the lacking of structured self-representations by the natives themselves and of a native anthropology; assuming a cognitive exclusivity that does not exist; assuming a role of the ethnographer as the lonely

searcher in a foreign land, the cornerstone of science projected among alien people; and also assuming some expositive conventions which are hardly suitable for the new conditions of ethnographic encounter.

## **2. Vinsanto in Eden: a pastoral elegy**

It would be interesting to carry out a systematic review of the studies of Italy that have been produced by the greatest anthropological traditions. Our country - and the South in particular - has been considered by many schools to be a classical field of research, and there is a wide literature regarding it. However, I can only propose here a small explorative exercise: the analysis of three brief contributions which exemplify as many classical representational strategies, even though they move on different levels of anthropological investigation, refinement and competence.

The first is an essay by Anne Tyler Calabresi, concerning the production and consumption of *Vin Santo* (literally: "Holy Wine", a traditional local strong sweet wine) in a farmhouse of the Chianti area named Rignano. The essay appeared in 1987, as a chapter in a volume edited by Mary Douglas, *Constructive Drinking. Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology*. The strategy which is being used here is of a kind that Clifford [1986] would call "pastoral". The article gives an idyllic vision of farmhouse life, focusing the attention of readers on natural food consumption and on traditional agricultural techniques that achieve a peculiar balance between man and nature:

Waiting for the *vendemmia* ["grape harvest"] is a tense, expectant moment on the farm [...]. The warmth of the season increases the pleasure of bringing in the fruit. The light is softer and hazier than under the dry glaze of the high summer sun. The air is thick and white in the morning as the bloom on the skin of the yellow grapes. Pears, apples, figs, late peaches and the grapes are warm to the touch on vines and branches: dessert is festooned about the farm [Tyler Calabresi 1987: 122].

The author's main purpose is to show the role of *Vin Santo* in traditional Tuscan rural culture as a product full of symbolic values of prestige, in opposition to the more common red wine. The latter is an everyday object of consumption, whereas *Vin Santo* is used as a demarcator of non-ordinary moments: the reception of guests, the end of meals, religious cult and so on. In addition *Vin Santo* is produced with selected grapes and undergoes a different vinification process, longer than that of common wine. In traditional rural culture, producing and consuming good *Vin Santo* is a value in itself; it is the symbol - as the author puts it - of the positive course of rural activity and the "success" of the rural family.

Ethnographic description is centred on the figures of two old farmers (sharecroppers) of the farmhouse of Rignano, whose very names recall an Edenic scenery: Adamo and Maria. Tyler Calabresi describes them acting in several situations of production and consumption, and she either quotes in full or paraphrases some of their statements. They work alone in the farmhouse, with the occasional help of their sons and daughters who work and live in the nearby town. The author never says that this is an absolutely non-typical situation for present day Tuscany - even if she vaguely hints at the decadence of the sharecropping system. Actually, she may have even found the last two sharecroppers in Tuscany, who live and work in a situation which is absolutely extraneous to the classical sharecropping system. For instance, the landlord (a landlady in this case) is never mentioned in their conversation - on just a single occasion, she is criticised for her tastes in wine. Furthermore, the management of the farmhouse is presented more as a free-time and leisure activity than a working one: dessert foods like wine and fruit are the only things produced, and cooking and consuming meals seem to be the main activities of Maria and Adamo. There is no sign of traditional features of the sharecropping system, like the exploitation of peasants, strenuous work, and starvation. But the reader is made believe that the described situation is representative of "true tradition".

Nor does the author put herself on the stage. She does not say how or why she studied these people and this context. She only tells us that Adamo and Maria often invite her for lunch - indeed, she finishes her article with the menu of one of those lunches, the lunch for the end of the grape harvest or *vendemmia*. She does not say what kind of relationship she has with these informants: one can only deduce that they consider her to be an important guest (maybe she owns a neighbouring country-house - indeed, foreign tourism rather than sharecropping is the a source of income in present-day Chianti). The whole essay is lacking of time indicators - we do not know when this ethnographic encounter has occurred - and there are very few references to geographic and social contexts. The farmhouse is described as isolated from the rest of the world and as a tendentially self-sufficient universe; the town is only referred to once, while talking about the place where the farmers' sons work. One is also made believe that the two old sharecroppers are self-sufficient as far as food consumption is concerned, only occasionally going to the market - a fact which is of course highly improbable.

The author tries to speak from inside the discourse of Adamo and Maria. She aims at representing their world-vision by using very frequent full quotations or paraphrases («Adamo says that...», «as Adamo says...», and so on). Still, the direct quotations are full of many transcription errors from the Italian language:

in particular, double consonants, accents and capital letters are systematically wrong, giving the native reader a subtle deforming feeling. There is also an egregious translation error: when translating the proverb *Prima di metterti in cammino beviti un vinsantino* ("before you start your journey, have a little *Vin Santo*"), the author neglects the value of a double "m" and confuses *cammino* ("walk" or "journey") with *camino* ("fire-place"), translating "Before you sit by the fire have a little *Vin Santo*".

The author tries to give the essay - which is mainly descriptive - a technical structure as well. This is evidenced by a glossary - useful enough, but once again a bit curious for a native like me: apart from the usual mistakes in the transcription of the words (e.g., the wooden wine casks are called *Barillo* instead of *barile*, *Carattello* instead of *caratello*, and so on), it puts together without distinction words belonging to common language, archaic language, dialect and slang terms.

A continuity of Adamo and Maria's culture with a very ancient past is very often suggested, though not explicitly declared, by suddenly introducing in the description references to the Latin or Medieval world. An example:

There is always [in the farm] a surfeit of the reliable hardy figs which are filling and have a high sugar content. In Roman times Cato suggested issuing a smaller ration of wheat for bread to his farm workers when the figs where plentiful. When Maria was a child, a piece of bread with figs was breakfast [Ibid.: 123].

From Cato to Maria's childhood, it is one and the same world - the reader thinks. Likewise, describing a meal:

*Porcini di castagno*, these were the big mushrooms that grew near the roots of the chestnut trees in the fall. The most succulent treat from the wood, they have been relished since ancient times. One appears next a rabbit in a mosaic at Pompeii [...]. Maria sliced them up... [Ibid.: 132].

Tyler Calabresi is clearly struck by "alternative" characteristics - so to speak - of Tuscan rural culture, and exaggerates them in her representation by using a long series of statements that are not supported by any empirical evidence. For instance, the statement that "until recently" (not more clearly specified) the *Vin-santo* was not found for sale in stores or markets. Perhaps this was so in the mythical past of our ancestors. Non-native readers take such things for granted, on the basis of the simple fact that the author has been there, to use Geertz's phrase. At the same time, the author stresses the "holistic" relationship between Adamo and nature. Adamo is interested in the value of food and eats only natural products because, as he says, one must trust only things that grow on one's own land, under one's own eye; such things give strength, which in turn allows for

successful production. Adamo's self-confidence derives from the fact that he is able to directly produce the essentials of his sustenance. This is interesting. But I think there is a bit of naivety in representing the traditional values of Adamo as if they were part of a still intact life-style and not as a kind of nostalgia, a reaction to the radical changes that have occurred in such life-style, in the world of his youth.

Like all "pastoral" representations, this essay aims to rescue a culture that is dying out. But surely what is described is not the classical sharecropping system (the author does not speak about a world of labour and class-relationships but mainly about a free-time world, where neither the landlord nor hunger exists - as the rich menu at the end of the essay shows). Nor the present situation of cultural change is described, given that the author leaves the very things that could be most interesting from this point of view in the background: the town-country relationship, the figures of the sons who work in the town and help at the farmhouse maintaining some peasant skills.

To criticize this essay, in the light of a native's cultural competence, may be all too easy. The problem is to understand what kind of ethnographer's authority is inscribed in it. What legitimizes the author to give voice to Adamo and Maria? Obviously, the legitimation is grounded on the feeling of being part of a superior culture that can save those voices. Her effort to understand Adamo and Maria's world-view from the inside, and her effort to master their cultural and linguistic codes are notable, but incomplete and approximate. And the very incompleteness and approximation that could be forgiven Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands cannot be forgiven Tyler Calabresi in Rignano in Chianti. We wonder how many transcriptions of *kula* words or magic formulas Malinowski might have mistaken: nevertheless in the 20's he rendered in his texts a cultural universe that was otherwise inaccessible to the Western reader.

But the context - historical and epistemological - of an English-speaking anthropologist doing fieldwork in contemporary Italy is quite different. She makes an enormous effort of participant observation in order to incompletely possess and describe a culture already "saved" in a wide literature (novels, folklore studies, historical narratives). A culture, moreover, that the natives themselves gave evidence of being able to express using the same "rescue" and "pastoral elegy" mode, apart from more sophisticated and advanced forms. The contemporary anthropologist finds herself in a field already full of texts, but pretends to ignore them: significantly, the essay does not have a bibliography and the reader is led to believe that no other contributions on the subject exist, let alone natives' contributions.

### 3. Sir James Frazer and the *Mutua*

Another strategy is used in the second examined essay: that of introducing the cultural representation within a theoretical framework. A general problem is stated at the beginning and should be solved or clarified by empirical data. This is probably the most classical model of anthropological essay, the most widespread among genre conventions (even though the relationship between theoretical problems and empirical data is often not cogent enough, remaining external, as a pure exemplification). This essay, "Folk medicine and metaphor in the context of medicalization: Syncretics in curing practices", is written by an American medical anthropologist, Lola Romanucci-Ross; it appeared in 1983 in a volume about *The Anthropology of Medicine*, edited by Romanucci-Ross herself and others.

The interesting theoretical problem in which the author engages her authority is the relationship between official medicine - or as she defines it, the "medicalization system in advanced societies" - and folk medical culture. She states that between these two systems there is not opposition, but interpenetration. What people learn from the divulgence of official medicine mixes with the remains of traditional medical knowledge and therapeutic practices. This thesis is illustrated through an example from central Italy - not Tuscany this time but the region of Marche, specifically the province of Ascoli Piceno. The author's declared aim is the reconstruction of the therapeutic course, the journey- cure through which people negotiate their status as ill by means of medical resources that are indifferently taken from the modern scientific context or from the traditional popular one.

So far, everything is very interesting. But the presentation of the empirical matter - which is concentrated in just a few pages - is astonishing. For one thing, the research is not precisely placed from an historical point of view, nor is it outlined with regard to its practical methods. We can read in a note that «anthropological field research in Italy was continued in four field trips of six to eight weeks' duration each in 1976, 1977, 1978 and 1979» [Romanucci-Ross 1983: 18]; but we do not know why the author visited the Marche, what kind of research instruments she used, what documents she produced and so on. The same linguistic errors of the essay discussed previously occur in the transcription from Italian (capital letters, double consonants, and articles are improperly used; there are mistakes in phonetic correspondence such as *sirocco* instead of *scirocco* and so on). As far as informants are concerned, she refers to two or three cases of healers she has come to know - we do not even know whether directly or not - and to conversation with some doctors: and all of them are considered to be representative.

The author wants to demonstrate how the population of the Marche (the "Marchigiano" in general, without any further qualification), notwithstanding the modern context in which they live, still maintain their popular and traditional beliefs about the body and medicine. To this end, she reports a number of popular beliefs and superstitions, without specifying if they are urban or rural, present or traditional, whether drawn from newspapers or repertories or simply heard from somebody. An example:

Among the rural villages in which current research is being pursued, the agricultural fields are found to contain Christian crosses made of cane and olive palm for the protection of crops from tempests. If you happen to be there on January 17, you will hear hymns sung to San Antonio d'Abbate [*sic*] for the protection of domestic animals from sickness and death. In a small village called Castel di Croce on a mountain called Castello, there is a huge ancient oak tree: it is said that if one breaks or cuts a small branch at the tip of the tree, a wind will be unleashed that will destroy the harvest of the entire zone [Romanucci-Ross 1983: 7].

We have here a typical Frazerian way of reporting "savage" beliefs. Indeed, Romanucci-Ross suggests a Frazerian interpretation of this culture, when she slyly states that «the people in this region had not heard of *The Golden Bough*, but it was not far from here that Frazer found in history the mythical events that led him through 12 volumes of the relationships among magic, religion and scientific thought» [Ibid.] (she obviously means the lake of Nemi in the neighbouring region of Lazio). And again:

The city of Ascoli Piceno had its own *magò* ("sorcerer"), known as Cecco d'Ascoli. *Maghi* and *streghe* ("witches") are considered real and effective; one will be told even today of a *magò* in the nearby province of Abruzzi [*sic*] who went out with a coven and sacrificed a crow and a male goat, at which the sky darkened and the rains came [Ibid.].

In this small extract, we find side by side an historical fact (Cecco d'Ascoli was a late-Medieval scholar), a general statement about present-day beliefs about witches, a reported ritual practice from another region. The sources are not mentioned. It should be noticed the wide use of impersonal constructions, like «Witches are considered real and effective», «one will be told even today of a *magò*...», etc. *Who* considers witches to be real and effective? *Who* tells of magic sacrifices to cause rain in Abruzzi? Are there real practices behind these reported beliefs? Popular superstitions are piled up without saying who shares them, whether they belong to past or present, real beliefs or simple folklore, and so on. The magical syncretisms of Catholic religion are also reported: amulets for the *malocchio* (evil eye), rituals for the protection of children and so on. As for the *Vinsanto* article,

one is struck by the fact that this information is given without any reference to the vast Italian literature dealing with the matter: it is as if Romanucci-Ross had been the first one to visit these "lost world" and had first-hand gathered this information.

Contrasting with these superstitions is the official medical system, which is dominated by the institution of the *Mutua*, the «social security system that includes health care insurance» [Ibid.: 8]. Romanucci-Ross reports this term in Italian with the capital letter, the *Mutua*, so that it sinisterly reminds one of the name of some secret society, like the *Mafia*. Without explaining what the *Mutua* in fact is, only the criticisms expressed by a physician are reported. The main point that is stressed is that Italy is full of hypochondriacs or *malades imaginaires*, «not in the sense of Moliere's play, but in the sense that they are constantly diagnosing each other and recommending cures». It seems as if the only desire of people were that of being cured at the *Mutua's* expense. People manage to get the physician's signature that allows them to embark on all kinds of cures - even if they are not ill at all. *Mutua* pays for everything, including sweat and mud cures, inhalations and trips to thermal resorts too. «Few find it dishonest», Romanucci-Ross comments; they justify themselves saying that «the Government always takes, it ought to give a little!». The American sensibility of the author is evidently shocked by the fact that the State pays for these treatments. There is indeed a good deal of truth in her criticism, but it is carried out with such a strong impetus that her ethnography is turned to a simple caricature.

The other side of this striving to obtain cures and medications is a poor confidence in them. Everyone requests and receives medications, but few really "take" them. Most of all, there is a widespread diffidence toward psychoactive drugs and the medicalization of psychological problems. Romanucci-Ross seems to consider this a sign of cultural backwardness. Therapeutic psychoanalysis, she remarks, has little success because

there are difficulties selling the premises of psychoanalysis to a culture that considers repression to be good - in fact, the only possible basis for civility as well as civilization. Furthermore, it is believed that the unconscious is almost always evil and should be suppressed. Such are the uses of prayers, as the lives of saints (some from these parts) suggest [Ibid.: 9].

The Marchigiano is also lacking another element of modernity: trust in physical exercise, which is not considered to be healthy. «Exercise, or any physical movement without an immediate utilitarian goal is particularly discouraged for women. Any woman who even discusses the possibility of putting an interest in exercise into practice is regarded as a libertine, with tendencies toward lubricity» [Ibid.: 11].

The Marchigiano's whole philosophy - we are told - is expressed by the proverb *Campa cavallo che l'erba cresce*, explained by the author as «an admonishment to a horse to concentrate simply on his personal efforts to keep alive - for as he does so, the grasses (sustenance) around him will one way or another, by natural or social necessity, keep growing». And she goes on observing:

In the instancing of such a presupposition, Mr. F., a communist, signed up for one week of work absence during a religious festa, claiming that he has injured his chest lifting a heavy umbrella in the line of duty on his job in a public works department. The insurance doctor "recommended" it simply on the basis of Mr. F.'s claim that he could not work. This happens with frequency... [Ibid.: 9].

Well. This is the representation of a real and well-known Italian bad habit. But what follows is really puzzling: «in fact, the notion of the local hospital is that it is to be used as a rest home», where «the "truly ill" are surrounded by those recovering from "nerves", and all are surrounded by relatives and friends bearing gifts of food...» [Ibid.]. The mental hospitals are even more desired: indeed, people «manage to convince the *Mutua* doctors that they need a rest in a mental hospital». The psychiatric hospitals visited (the author cites for instance the Ricovero Ferrucci in Ascoli) were filled with the elderly alone in the world with no close relatives, not with the "truly mad". Indeed, we are told, both patients and caretakers don't believe in "madness" as a medical concept:

Observable here was the recognition by both "patients" and caretakers alike that "madness" is a medical opinion that cannot be refereed by experts... Therefore, all played out with various degrees of merriment a Pirandello scene in which the caretakers seemed grateful to "the mad" for rendering them employable, and "the mad" replayed old roles of romantic reminiscences amidst flowers, colored ribbons, and sweets. Such conscious role playing was particularly enjoyed by all when there were visitors. I was subtly invited to join this trick on the "state" and the "science" of psychiatry at the Ricovero Ferrucci... The "truly mad" are, of course, welcomed here, since they validate the institution. It would be interesting to study the therapeutic effect (or intensifying effect) of such environs for the "truly mad" [Ibid.: 10].

One should be reminded that that the late 1970s were the years of anti-psychiatric movements, which caused (in Italy as elsewhere) deep changes in public attitudes and in social policies about "the mad". But there is no mention of this in Romanucci-Ross' essay. She reports the critique of the medical concept of "madness" as a folk oddity, another kind of "superstition".

In short, the whole Italian National Health Service is described as a system «used, by personnel and patients alike, to make illness and curing exploitable

events, with the government paying the costs» [Ibid.: 10]. However partially true, this description is caricatural. As already noted, the author's statements are rhetorically introduced by expressions such as "many say", "some assert" or by the passive forms "it is asserted", "it is believed". By these expressions she wants to give a general value to her ethnographic statements: but actually we never know who says what, and no real figure (apart from Mr. F., the communist) stands out of the scenery described in the essay. No Italian writing is cited in the bibliography, either on the official medical system, the *Mutua* or superstitions and popular medicine (to tell the truth, Romanucci-Ross cites almost exclusively her previous writings).

In this article there is a theoretical authority that cannot be questioned by the native reader on the basis of his local competence alone; and this theoretical aspect gives the work - so to speak - a solid legitimation to exist. But the ethnographic representation - inscribed in the theoretical problem and forced to correspond to the needs of argumentation - is undoubtedly superficial. The native can hardly recognize his own country in this picture of a strange kind of place, where people constantly manage to fall ill just to exploit the State. But it is not only a matter of quality of research. My thesis is that the inadequacy of this representation derives primarily from epistemological and discursive presuppositions assumed by the author - her Malinowskian posture, as it were, a posture that is out of place in the historically situated context she tries to study.

#### **4. Deep play in Tavarnelle**

The third contribution I want to discuss is of a much higher quality - in fact, it is an example of very good ethnography. The author is the British anthropologist Ronald Frankenberg, the title "Who can tell the tale? Texts and problem of generational and social identity in a Tuscan rural *Comune*"; the essay appeared in 1993 in a collection on Western European identities.

The Tuscan Commune in object is Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, also situated in the area of Florentine Chianti, where the author long stayed in the 1980s to study the Italian public health reform. However, this is not an article of medical anthropology but a classical community ethnography, aiming at giving a whole picture of Tavarnelle and discussing the problems of generational, social and political identity of its inhabitants. Here we find a third classical ethnographic strategy: the representation of a social whole by means of the description and detailed report of a micro-event, such as a ritual, a feast, a ceremony and so on. Malinowski's *Kula* or Bateson's *Naven* are celebrated examples of this "synecdochic" rhetorical stance, as James Clifford [1988: 31] calls it. Frankenberg takes two

popular festivals as the focus of his research. The first is the *Festa dell'Unità*, promoted by the Communist Party (now PDS, Democratic Left Party), the main political party in Tavarnelle and in Tuscany; the second, a festival initiated by the Commune in 1983 as a self-conscious attempt «to symbolise the unity and achievement of all Tavarnellini/e», to create a wide aggregative basis for a local identity which breaks the traditional political and generational divisions.

The essay starts with a very sophisticated epistemological and theoretical framework. The author discusses the problem of cultural textualization - ethnography as the inscription of cultures within texts - in the light of interpretive anthropology deriving from Geertz and Clifford. He then turns to fieldwork materials, saying that even if he was prepared to accept the textual metaphors, he was surprised to find out that in Tavarnelle the formula "culture equals text" had been applied quite literally. In fact, local identity in this small town seems to grow and spread mainly through texts:

Co-textuality as creator of context took me by surprise. For the people of Tavarnelle are accustomed to inscribe and have inscribed their diverse and their shared consciousness in texts which sometimes (...) are officially made available, at least in theory, to a wider audience [Frankenberg 1993: 58].

During the eighteen months of his fieldwork, Frankenberg saw the publication of a lot of books and pamphlets, which were issued for the most part with the official support of the Commune itself: studies about local traditions and history, collections of schoolchildren's works, catalogues of art exhibitions and so on [Ibid.: 58-9]. Frankenberg focuses his analysis on one of these texts: a play by Ugo Chiti entitled *Volta la carta... ecco la casa* (the title is a line of a children's rhyme - a rough translation is "Turn over the Card... Here is the House") that was performed on the occasion of the new non-political festival in 1983. It is a nostalgic, disenchanting and at the same time ironic recollection of the rural past of Chianti area, written in Tuscan dialect and aimed at presenting the main features of traditional peasant life and cultural identity [see Chiti et al. 1984]. Frankenberg sees in this work (not only in the text but also in the circumstances of its financing, staging and performing), a dramatization of the relationships among generations of Tavarnellini. Each generation has its own values, its own past, its own aspirations, but they try at least to symbolically recuperate a possible common identity through the confrontation with a shared past:

The performance as an event and the totality of its organisational timing, placing and context asserts common identity between generations at the same time as it emphasizes difference. Young people [the actors are local non-professional young men and women] please their immediate forebears by learning

their dialect and representing their past. The older generation provides ideological approval, finance, publication and a permanent record of an activity which they might normally be expected to regard as avant-garde and perhaps frivolous. Identities of values derived from descent and from shared political goals are made to appear congruent [Ibid.: 79].

It's not possible here to follow the author in his detailed analysis of this text-creating-context. Frankenberg understands the play well, has a good linguistic competence, makes clear his interpretive steps, cites sources and documents. His description of the socio-economic context of the town is quite precise; his interpretive reading of the festivals is subtle and intriguing. Like every good "reflexive" writer, he inscribes himself in his article, describing his role within the community and his relationships with the Tavarnellini (it seems they called him *il compagno inglese* - "the English comrade", a definition which stresses proximity and alterity at the same time).

However, once again, the native reader cannot escape a certain kind of uneasiness, perhaps because of the nature of the text itself as anthropological essay. Classical strategies of ethnographic representation are used. For instance, Frankenberg refers in general to "his people" as "the Tavarnellini" - and this reminds us of the Nuer, the Tikopia and so on, that is of the abstract tribal identities of classical ethnography). Of course "Tavarnellini" is also a local ("emic", so to speak) category: but Frankenberg seems to assume that "tavarnellità" (being Tavarnellini) is the true core of their identity as human beings - and that their main problem is that of matching a common "tavarnellità" with different generational and political identities. From the native's point of view, however, the problem of cultural identity seems a little more complex. Belonging to a Commune is only one among other marks of identity, more or less important depending on the context. Those very persons who in certain moments define themselves as Tavarnellini, or as communists/anti-communists, or as young-old, have in fact a lot of other possible and as much important core-identities - i.e. Florentines, Tuscans, Italians, Europeans, workmen or professionals, fans of a football team, blood-donors, Jehovah witnesses, ecologists, hunters, married people, singles and so on. By taking for granted a common major identity linked to village-belonging, the author "tribalizes" *de facto* his field of research.

The writer (if not the man and the fieldworker) Frankenberg, *malgré lui*, assumes a Malinowskian stance, too. For instance, he studies native texts but neglects native interpretations. He deeply analyzes the play *Volta la carta...*, translated with the help of one of his students of Italian origin [Ibid.: 70 ff.]. However, he seems to ignore the existence of a local exegetic tradition of popular

theatre and its revival (an exception is the brief quotation of two Tuscan folklorists, P. De Simonis and A. Falassi [Ibid.: 78]). Why does he neglect the fact that in 1983, just a few kilometres away from Tavarnelle, there were two Universities (Siena and Florence) that had long been studying these kinds of texts and problems? Of course, Frankenberg knows all this very well: but his striving for ethnographic authority requires, so to speak, a fiction of exclusivity, the posture of a lone researcher in an alien land.

This leads him to undervalue the *anthropological* awareness which from the beginning is present in this theatre-event - that is in the writing of Chiti, in the actors who perform the play, in the politicians who support it financially. The *Volta la carta* performance was part of a wider project, political and scientific at once, of «documenting, studying and giving new value to various elements of popular and peasant culture» - as we can read in an official document published by the Commune in 1986 (*La terra e la memoria*, typescript). Writer, actors, politicians and public were conscious of doing a kind of creative ethnography. Here we have a native discourse deeply imbued with anthropological language and imagery. *Volta la carta* is not only a native ritual; it is also a conscious anthropological search (perhaps we can call it an anthropological ritual).

This aspect does not easily enter into Frankenberg's consideration. As an author, he has to maintain a meta-discursive stance toward the natives. He needs to keep his own discourse and the discourse of natives (in other words, the resources and the object of his research) clearly divided. By maintaining such a distinction, he can proceed to explain in a "real" language the sense of native's words and behaviour - or at least, to render explicit a sense that is only implicit for them. For this reason, it must be a little embarrassing to find out that natives speak an anthropological jargon (that is, a "real language") themselves.

Furthermore, the very strategy of representation through synecdoche - the whole community with its identity problems is read in a dramatic performance - raises problems. In the first place, the author's choice of *Volta la carta* as his Master Synecdoche is wholly arbitrary and not easy to accept for a native reader. As a matter of fact, the show was attended by no more than twenty spectators for each performance [Ibid.: 70]; its very existence remained (and still remains) unknown for most of Tavarnellini. On what basis can the author assume this «avant-garde and frivolous» performance as a mirror of the whole community? But another point is still more important. Frankenberg's synecdochical approach, as well as his insistence on "tavarnellit ", has the effect of stressing the notion of community, with its connotations of solidity and homogeneity. Together with exclusivity (the

lone researcher), community is the other great organizing trope of "realist ethnography". In the realist tradition, «the concept of community in the classic sense of shared values, shared identity, and thus shared culture has been mapped literally onto locality to define one basic frame of reference orientating ethnography» [Marcus 1994: 315]. But this frame of reference may be misleading in the context of modernity (that is in the new social and epistemological conditions of ethnographic representation), defined by G. E. Marcus in terms of "dispersed identity":

The notion of community [...] has been replaced in the framework of modernity by the idea that the situated production of identity - of a person, of a group, or even a whole society - does not depend alone, or even always primarily, on the observable, concentrated activities within a particular locale or a diaspora. The identity of anyone or any group is produced simultaneously in many different locales of activity by many different agents for many different purposes. One's identity where one lives, among one's neighbours, friends, relatives, or co-strangers, is only one social context, and perhaps not the most important one in which it is shaped. For a modernist approach to identity in ethnography, it is this process of dispersed identity in many different places of differing character that must be grasped [Ibid.].

Frankenberg organizes his ethnography around the idea of a relatively closed and coherent community striving to define its own identity, and underestimates the processes of identity dispersion. He doesn't grasp the centrifugal force - so to speak - of an event like *Volta la carta*. In a sense, the play is a conscious effort not only to rescue, but also to remove or exorcize the rural past and to gain a whole modern and non-local identity. Represented in a work of art, objectified in ethnographic texts or museums, the past is no more a real possibility. Furthermore, the artistic (or ethnographic) activity of representation can itself be a way to overcome the limits of the community. In fact, for some of the young performers *Volta la carta* was an opportunity to leave Tavarnelle, escaping from "villager" identity and engaging in the more cosmopolitan and homeless career of acting (at least one of them is today a professional actor).

Once again, the native reader can hardly escape doubts about ethnographic authority. However, in this case is also difficult not to acknowledge Frankenberg's work with a high degree of legitimacy. His article has some enlightening effects, as a glance cast from far away often has: it makes us think about aspects of our culture which maybe we had not thought about before. And the uneasiness of being looked at by a stranger's eyes, of being spied by the voyeuristic glance of the anthropologist is perhaps the price we have to pay for the progress of our awareness. Distortion and comprehension always walk together. The radical criticisms

of any discursive production about the Other - like E. Said's [1978] criticism of orientalism or M. Hobart's [1995] of anthropology - neglect this point. For instance, Hobart sees ethnography as an objectifying practice grounded on the «disciplining of natives», and talks about the «cruel twist in a sympathetic study of others, by which understanding comes to be the most subtle form of objectification, by making people subjects» [1995: 18].

The limit of these "fundamentalist" approaches does not lay in the refusal of any possibility of an objective and neutral knowledge of man (the scientific critique). It rather lays in the refusal to acknowledge a very simple fact: "objectivation" of Others in our discursive practices (be they artistic, literary, scientific or other) is the *only* way we have to try and understand them, to speak about and with them - or at least this is a way, a way of central importance in our culture.

The fact that anthropology can and must continue to exist, apart from any epistemological criticism, derives from this very point: while imposing the rule of naturalization [Hobart 1995], it also produces understanding, opening a space for discourse and confrontation that maybe would not exist without it. Furthermore, the reflexive dimension which is intrinsic both to the practice of ethnography and to the production of anthropological discourse (given that "reflexive anthropology" is not only a genre of anthropology among others, or a particular disciplinary approach) leads us to continuously think about how we naturalize others and how others naturalize us. Ernesto de Martino, the founding father of Italian tradition of anthropological studies, called "critical ethnocentrism" [see Saunders 1993] this virtuous circle of naturalizing and understanding.

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