

US AND THEM

ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL BASES OF POLITICAL CRITICISM

In a context in which the relationships between our knowledge of and participation in the external world and such criteria as truth, objectivity, and rationality are being re-examined, the claims of a specifically political criticism come to occupy the centre of the intellectual stage. Whether inspired by social and intellectual movements such as feminism, Marxism, and anti-imperialist nationalisms, or interdisciplinary academic developments such as deconstruction and more generally poststructuralism, political criticism can be identified by at least a common desire to expose the social interests at work in the reading and writing of literature. It may not always be tied to larger programmes or alternative models of cultural practice, but criticism is political to the extent that it defines as one of its goals the interrogation of the *uses* to which literary works are put, exploring the connections between social institutions and literary texts, between groups of people understood collectively in terms of gender, sexuality, race and class, and discourses about cultural meanings and values. This article is an attempt to identify, define, and criticize what I see as an unexamined philosophical position latent in contemporary political-critical practice - cultural or historical relativism. Relativism appears less as an idea than as a practical and theoretical bias, and leads, I believe, to a certain amount of historical simplification and political naivete.

My specific contention is that a relativist position does not allow for a complex understanding of social and cultural phenomena since the vagueness of its definition of rationality precludes a serious analysis of historical agency. In outlining the claims of two versions of relativism, an extreme and a more sophisticated kind, I intend to show why we need a more precise definition of rationality than either offers. As I shall argue, it would be seriously debilitating for critical analysis to confuse a minimal notion of rationality as a cognitive and practical human capacity with the grand a priori foundational structure that has traditionally been called Reason. Indeed, as we seek now to understand the colonial encounters which have shaped our historical modernity, and extend or radically revise our current notions of philosophical and cultural 'conversation', the task of elaborating a positive post-humanist conception of the 'human' can be seen as tied to this specification of a minimal rationality. I suggest that the need for a basic definition of human agency, and the conception of rationality it implies, should be faced directly by political criticism, and I shall outline the context in which this and related issues might

be analysed. After providing in the first section of the article preliminary definitions of political criticism and relativism, and delineating some of the relevant contexts in which they can be discussed, I shall provide in the next section a more specific account of a debate within social anthropology to show the complexity of political motives, alignments, and positions involved in any topic-specific consideration of relativism. Section three provides the primary arguments against relativist positions considered generally, suggesting why they will not serve as useful bases for political criticism. The last section develops my reasons for considering human agency and rationality urgent issues for contemporary criticism, and proposes the terms with which such issues might be elaborated.

I FRAMING THE ISSUES: CONTEXTS AND DEFINITIONS

It would be useful, before going on, to indicate the intellectual context in which relativism can be said to have originated to clarify both its value as a political gesture and its limits as a concept for the analysis of literature and culture. Even though it took definite shape in the course of the nineteenth century, relativism has its origins in the late-eighteenth-century reaction to the universalist claims of Enlightenment thought. Stressing not merely the presence of historical variety but also the constitutional differences evident in human languages, communities, and societies, writers such as J. G. Herder urged that we recognize the changeability of human 'nature'. Their arguments pointed up the inability of any single faculty, such as what the Enlightenment thinkers called Reason, to comprehend the diverse manifestations of human culture and history. Herder emphasized the creativity of the human mind, and argued that we understand its individual creations only by situating them in their particular social and cultural contexts. The development of relativism as a powerful intellectual presence is, as Patrick Gardiner has shown in a useful essay, best seen as a post-Herderian phenomenon that draws on nineteenth-century German idealist philosophy, with Fichte, Hegel, and ultimately Dilthey as the convenient individual signposts of this intellectual-historical narrative.¹ Very generally understood, this development underscored the need to define the claims of difference over identity, historical novelty and variety over methodological monism: against the Enlightenment's emphasis on a singular rationality underlying and comprehending all human activities, relativism pursued the possibilities of change, variety, and difference, and began thereby to pose the question of otherness.

It is this question that becomes a basic political gesture in the context of contemporary literary theory and criticism. To situate and illustrate this politics, let me cite as epigraphs three quotations from fairly influential and representative sources that suggest both the dominant political-critical climate these days and a possible basis for relativist arguments. These passages are representative of a general tendency in contemporary criticism; indeed, they delineate some of the central features of what one writer has punningly called the poststructuralist *condition*.² The emphasis on discontinuity; the celebration of difference and heterogeneity, and the assertion of plurality as opposed to

reductive unities - these ideas have animated almost an entire generation of literary and cultural critics. I do not propose to explicate the passages here, nor am I attempting an intellectual history; what I would like to do, however, is identify one issue inherent in some of the large political-philosophical gestures we see in these quotations, and examine its meanings and implications. Let me then begin by underscoring one theme all these passages imply or directly discuss: a sort of epistemic mutation, relevant not only in cultural criticism but in social theory and historiography as well.

[The] epistemological mutation is not yet complete. But it is not of recent origin either, since its first phase can no doubt be traced back to Marx. But it took a long time to have much effect. Even now - and this is especially true in the case of the history of thought - it has been neither registered nor reflected upon, while other, more recent transformations - those of linguistics, for example - have been. It is as if it was particularly difficult, in the history in which men retrace their own ideas and their own knowledge, to formulate a general theory of discontinuity; of series, of limits, unities, specific orders, and differentiated autonomies and dependencies. As if, in that field where we had become used to seeking origins, to pushing back further and further the line of antecedents, to reconstituting traditions, to following evolutive curves, to projecting teleologies, and to having constant recourse to metaphors of life, we felt a particular repugnance to conceiving of difference, to describing separations and dispersions, to dissociating the reassuring form of the identical. . . . As if we were afraid to conceive of the *Other* in the time of our own thought.

In the beginning are our differences. The new love dares for the other, wants the other, makes dizzying, precipitous flights between knowledge and invention. The woman arriving over and over again does not stand still; she's everywhere, she exchanges, she is the desire-that-gives. . . . Wherever history unfolds as the history of death, she does not tread. Opposition, hierarchizing exchange, the struggle for mastery . . . all that comes from a period in time governed by phallogocentric values. The fact that this period extends into the present doesn't prevent woman from starting the history of life somewhere else. Elsewhere, she gives. . . . This is an 'economy' that can no longer be put in economic terms. Wherever she loves, all the old concepts of management are left behind. At the end of a more or less conscious computation, she finds not her sum but her differences. . . . When I write, it's everything that we don't know we can be that is written out of me. . . . Heterogeneous, yes. . . . the erotogeneity of the heterogeneous.

What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class, upon the role of Revolution, with a capital V, as the founding moment in the transition from one type of society to another, and upon the illusory prospect of a perfectly unitary and homogeneous collective will that will render pointless the moment of politics. The plural and multifarious character of contemporary social struggles has finally dissolved the last foundation for that political

imaginary: Peopled with 'universal' subject and conceptually built around History in the singular, it has postulated 'society' as an intelligible structure that could be intellectually mastered on the basis of certain class positions and reconstituted, as a rational, transparent order, through a founding act of a political character. Today the Left is witnessing the final act of the dissolution of that Jacobin imaginary.³

Common to all three passages is the idea that something of significance has been repressed or left unarticulated in our traditional conceptual frameworks. Though what is left out is variously formulated and named, the political force of these passages derives from a recognition that crucial social interests might be at stake in these absences or repressions, and the challenge for a critical discourse is to create the possibility for their (self-)representation. At the very least these passages urge us to respect the difference between the terms of the dominant framework and those the absent or repressed might use for its self-representation. But even that formulation is a little clumsy for what these passages would like to suggest. Our concepts of 'representation' or even what that 'it' might be (is it necessarily to be conceived in the singular, evidencing a unity, for instance?) are perhaps implicated in the very process of this repression or absence. Indeed, what the passages urge us to do is radicalize the idea of difference itself- the other is not us, they insist, and is quite possibly not even *like* us. Herein lies the challenge: how do we conceive the other, indeed- the Other, outside of our inherited concepts and beliefs so as not to replicate the patterns of repression and subjugation we notice in the traditional conceptual frameworks? Now, there are large and very difficult issues implied by this question, and much of our understanding of what is crucial to a poststructuralist political and critical climate depends on how we define and specify these issues. More than any synoptic or comprehensive view of poststructuralism, what we need today is greater clarity about what is presupposed, implied, or entailed by our formulation of questions of the 'other', which would in effect be an interrogation of proposed agendas through the process of seeking precise definitions.

It is with this in view that I would like to ask whether one of the possible extreme implications of these passages - that it is necessary to conceive the Other as a radically separable and separate entity in order for it to command our respect - is a useful idea. Just how other, we need to force ourselves to specify, is the Other? In literary criticism, as I shall indicate more directly towards the end of this article, such a question arises whenever we discuss unequal relations among groups of people, among languages, and canons with their institutionally sanctioned definitions of value, coherence, unity, and intelligibility. In all these instances, the crucial problems arise when we encounter other canons (or the non-canonical), other languages and values - in short, when we encounter competing claims and are forced to adjudicate. It is then that relativism becomes a viable philosophical option.

Relativism, as a methodological and substantive thesis, appears in various forms in various disciplinary contexts, but the most immediate context from

which contemporary criticism learns to specify its discussion of cultural otherness is anthropology. In fact the development of poststructuralist ideas in France can be historically located: the trajectory of purely philosophical concerns was influenced by preceding and contemporaneous debates in ethnology. As has been argued in various ways, the institutional history of anthropology is tied to European colonial expansion in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Naturally, the decline of the formal empires of Europe and the rise of anti-colonial movements and independent national states of the 'Third World' can be said to have encouraged a greater self-consciousness among anthropologists - from both the international 'metropolises' and the 'peripheral' countries - about the politics of studying other cultures. Thus, to put it very schematically, if it was possible to see anthropological description and interpretation of Third World cultures during the heyday of imperialism as largely complicitous with the exercise of power and the discursive mapping and manipulation of powerless others, the self-criticism of western anthropology needs to be understood not simply as the natural maturation and intellectual coming of age of a discipline, but rather as the result of both political challenges presented by these others and the related demystification of the west's recent history by its own progressive intellectuals. In this context, it is possible to see in the debates within, say, social anthropology in Britain in the last four decades or so, a heightened concern with methodological politics, an awareness of the historically entrenched nature of scholarly representations. Unselfconscious - and interested - misreadings of Third World societies and their values, texts, and practices, were, it was found, made possible not so much because of overt and explicitly stated racism (although there was a good dose of that in scholarly literature for anyone interested in looking), but primarily because of uncritical application and extension of the very ideas with which the west has defined its enlightenment and its modernity - reason, progress, civilization.⁴

In this general context - a context so general that it would be impossible to understand recent developments in most of the social sciences and the humanistic disciplines without it - the relativist thesis initially becomes a valuable political weapon. Opposing the imperial arrogance of the scholar who interprets aspects of other cultures in terms of the inflexible norms and categories of the scholar's own, the relativist insists on the fundamentally sound idea that individual elements of a given culture must be interpreted primarily in terms of that culture, relative, that is, to that system of meanings and values. Thus there is a clear political lesson that relativism teaches: it cautions us against ethnocentric explanations of other communities and cultures. Drawing on the example of ethnology, the relativist will tell us that texts (or events or values) can be significantly *misunderstood* if they are not seen in relation to their particular contexts. The relativist warns against reductionist explanations that use the terms of the familiar culture to appropriate the terms of the strange one. The central challenge is to the practices of interpretation and the unconscious evaluations embedded in them, for relativism teaches us that interpretation and understanding have historically been tied to political activities, and that 'strong' and 'meaningful' interpretations have often been

acts of discursive domination. Instead, relativism urges care and attentiveness to the specificities of context; it emphasizes the differences between and among us rather than pointing to shared spaces. What is hoped is that we will, one day, learn to share; that is relativism's Utopia.

II RELATIVISM IN ANTHROPOLOGY: AN INSTRUCTIVE EXCHANGE

From this very general account it might be possible to see how the relativist position can hold a great deal of attraction for contemporary political criticism. Problems begin to appear when we go beyond this general formulation and examine the position a little more closely, articulating its deeper implications and presuppositions. I shall be arguing in a moment that relativism is an untenable - and indeed rather dangerous - philosophical ally for political criticism. But let me first identify the larger scope and potential ambiguity of the issues involved by focusing on two essays, by Ernest Gellner and Talal Asad respectively. Gellner's is a classic essay, first published in 1951 and canonized by its inclusion in undergraduate textbooks in Britain to this day; Asad's critique appeared in a recent collection of essays by anthropologists critical of the politics of their own inherited tradition.⁵ Gellner attacks the relativist thesis in anthropological theory, associating it with a confused and 'excessively charitable' intellectual and political attitude. Asad, in his critique of Gellner's essay, does not so much defend relativism as outline one serious way in which Gellner's attack is misconceived. In Asad's view, the emphasis should be placed on the practices and institutions of anthropological 'cultural translation', existing as they do in a matrix of unequal languages and asymmetrical access to the institutions of discourse and power. I would like to outline some of these arguments briefly to indicate the instructive complexity of the issues involved in this debate; then I would like to show why despite the cogency of Asad's critique - which is particularly trenchant when it identifies the sloppy argumentative moves underlying Gellner's imperious tone - the problems surrounding the issue of relativism need to be explored more thoroughly.

One of the main points Gellner wishes to make in his essay concerns our attitude towards what we might consider 'illogical' or 'incoherent' ideas in the culture being studied. If the relativist claim remains that all cultural ideas are to be adequately understood only in their own contexts, i.e. only in terms of the systematic beliefs, practices, and values of the culture being studied, is the interpreter necessarily committed to always finding meaning and coherence and giving up all capacity to judge ideas in other cultures as incoherent and meaningless? The contextualist-relativist, says Gellner, errs in adopting this attitude of unwarranted 'charity'. For often in fact we *need* to grasp the internal incoherence of ideas as they operate within a culture in order to understand their precise function and valence. Thus even though the contextual interpretation claims to be giving us the 'real' interpretation of something by situating it in its surrounding world of beliefs and practices, Gellner would argue that in many cases the acontextual - isolated - evaluation of it (i.e. of a statement, proposition, or belief) is necessary if we are to

provide deeper accounts of it as a cultural phenomenon. What Gellner calls interpretive 'charity' is thus more a kind of sentimental liberalism: it dehistoricizes in the name of contextual analysis, and ends up ignoring the deep structural bases of the other culture.

After identifying the extreme form of the contextualist position, which would argue that all ideas are to be interpreted solely in terms internal to the context in which they are produced and used, Gellner insists on the need for a strong evaluative interpretation. Instead of arguing for abandoning the subjective dimension in interpreting others, Gellner wishes to assert the need - if an interpretation is to work at all - for applying criteria that do not derive simply from the object itself but are shared by the anthropologist's own culture. The following passage contains what may be the most succinct statement of his methodological thesis:

Professor Raymond Firth has remarked in *Problem and Assumption in an Anthropological Study of Religion*: 'From my own experience, I am impressed by the ease with which it is possible to add one's own personal dimension to the interpretation of an alien religious ideology, to raise the generalizations to a higher power than the empirical content of the material warrants.' My point is, really: that it is more than a matter of *ease* - it is a matter of necessity: for interpretation cannot be determinate without assumptions concerning the success or failure of the interpreted communication, and the criteria of such success are not manifest in the 'content of the material' itself. One has to work them out as best one can, and it will *not* do to take the short cut of reading them off the material by assuming that the material is always successful, i.e., that the statements investigated do satisfy and exemplify criteria of coherence, and hence that interpretation is not successful until this coherence has been made manifest in the translations. The logical *assessment* of an assertion, and the identification of its nearest equivalent in our language, are intimately linked and inseparable.

(33-4)

Building on his claim that 'sympathetic, positive interpretations of indigenous assertions are not the result of a sophisticated appreciation of context', and that in fact it may be that 'the manner in which the context is invoked, the amount and kind of context and the way the context itself is interpreted, depends on prior tacit determination concerning the kind of interpretation one wishes to find' (33), Gellner introduces here a series of more specific claims. Let me re-emphasize some of the crucial ones: 'the logical assessment' of an idea we have identified in the other culture is absolutely necessary for interpretation of the idea; an adequate interpretation of an idea in an unfamiliar culture involves a close translation into the 'language' of the familiar - i.e. the anthropologist's - culture. Charity is less crucial here than we might think; indeed, it might be a conceptual and analytical strait-jacket. If Gellner is right, we need to worry more about the internal coherence or logic of the idea in isolation *before* we begin to determine what the appropriate context for interpreting it might be.

This last point is in fact specified by Gellner himself elsewhere in the essay. We evaluate an idea encountered in another culture by apprehending it as an 'assertion', for which we then seek an equivalent assertion in our own language. And just as we judge assertions in our own language as either 'Good' or 'Bad' (Gellner's deliberately schematic terms to cover such polar attributes as true and false, meaningful and absurd, sensible and silly, etc.), we need also to evaluate the assertion/idea in the other culture. However, the 'tolerance-engendering contextual interpretation' evades this rigorous process of 'logical assessment' by assuming in advance that all assertions we encounter in the other culture are 'Good', i.e. meaningful and coherent, especially when we understand their own contextual terms and functions. For Gellner, this makes a mockery of the interpretive process itself, which must build on the logical assessment of (isolated) assertions.

The crucial assumption here is that 'logical assessment' of assertions can be made only to the extent that we define them in isolation, and we isolate assertions in their (unfamiliar) language exactly the way we do in our (familiar) one. It would seem that for Gellner the identification of an assertion - its definition in isolation from whatever we consider its context - is an unproblematical activity. It is this naive atomism, difficult enough to sustain when we are studying elements *within* our own culture and obviously more complicated and arrogant when we are approaching another, on which Gellner's argument seems to be based. Despite the occasional appearance of terms like 'interpretation' and 'hermeneutics', the essay exists in the bliss of pre-hermeneutical positivist confidence. The liberal relativists in anthropology among Gellner's contemporaries, fuelled by a generally Wittgensteinian philosophical climate, need to be attacked, and these are the essential terms with which he counters them. Gellner's terms of analysis - derived from his essentially positivist framework - obscure the most significant issues involved in anthropological interpretation in several ways. Talal Asad identifies one of these quite well; I would like to provide a selective account of his critique before I discuss the inadequacy of Gellner's treatment of relativism. In doing that, however, I will need, first, to develop our understanding of the relativist position by adding another level of complexity to the issues involved; and, second, to make Gellner's case against relativism with entirely different terms, challenging the liberals he attacks not for their excessive charity and tolerance but the political apathy entailed by their philosophical position.

Since Asad's critique of Gellner might have significant bearing on contemporary literary-critical theory and practice, it would be instructive to look at it in some detail. The most basic consideration Asad wishes to introduce into the discussion is simply that of the context of anthropological interpretation itself: not just the interpretation of, say, the Nuers and the Berbers, but of Anglophone white anthropologists writing in the middle of the twentieth century within intellectually and politically sanctioned hierarchies and codifications of knowledge. For what Gellner is able to ignore in his entire essay is the existence of institutionally sanctioned power relations between interpreter and the interpreted that determine the politics of meaning in the

first place. That the following reminder is necessary is itself embarrassing, and it might indeed point up the ambiguity of any critique of relativism, including the one I am making in this article. But Asad, let us remember, is not interested in defending the version of contextual-relativism Gellner attacks; rather, he is at pains to lay out the basic contextual terms with which any anthropological interpretive practice which sees itself performing 'cultural translation' must engage:

The relevant question . . . is not how tolerant an attitude the translator ought to display toward the original author (an abstract ethical dilemma), but how she can test the tolerance of her own language for assuming unaccustomed forms. . . . The matter is largely something the translator cannot determine by individual activity (any more than the individual speaker can affect the evolution of his or her language) - that it is governed by institutionally governed power relations between the languages/modes of life concerned. To put it crudely: because the languages of Third World societies - including, of course, the societies that social anthropologists have traditionally studied - are 'weaker' in relation to Western languages . . . they are more likely to submit to forcible transformation in the translation process than the other way around. The reason for this is, first, that in their political-economic relations with Third World countries, Western nations have the greater ability to manipulate. . . . And, second, Western languages produce and deploy desired knowledge more readily than Third World languages do. (157-8)

There are two closely related questions Asad raises here to contest Gellner's abstract approach. The first wonders about the adequacy of Gellner's formulation of the problem of interpretation in terms of logical 'charity' or 'tolerance', and we shall see in a moment how Asad would extend the meaning of the terms by restoring to them their practical context. The second question deals with the fundamental model of 'translation' itself. Gellner's formulation of anthropological interpretation in terms of 'charity' is a convenient abstraction that obscures the practice of western anthropologists studying other - i.e. non-western - cultures particularly in colonial and postcolonial contexts, since it ignores the basic hermeneutic question about the adequacy of the anthropologist's own cultural language (i.e. its capacity for 'tolerance' of new and unfamiliar meanings). The *possibility* that the interpreter and her analytical apparatus might be fundamentally challenged and changed by the material she (and it) are attempting to 'assess' is one that Gellner's account of the interpretive process ignores. Whether this account and others like it are naively positivist or whether they trail clouds of ideology and a specifiable political motive is something that needs analysis on its own terms. It may well be that 'decolonizing' anthropology will involve writing the discipline's prehistory in the process of developing such analyses, situating these glaring political blindnesses in the context of what may be their limited and skewed intellectual insights.⁶

In our obsessive fear that the typical western anthropologist might be guilty of excessive interpretive charity, we ignore the more significant fact that in our particular historical contexts the anthropologist, in order to be able to interpret at all, needs to educate herself through cultural and political 'sympathy'. Indeed, if we deepen our analysis we realize that the model of cultural translation is itself a misleading one: 'the anthropologist's translation is not merely a matter of matching sentences in the abstract, but of *learning to live another form of life*' (Asad, 149). The echo of Wittgenstein is deliberate, given Gellner's identification of the philosophical enemy, but it raises the important question about the limits of the conception of anthropological interpretation as a translation from one language to another. It suggests that 'languages' are not merely 'texts' if by that we mean that 'translations' can be considered '*essentially* a matter of verbal representation' (160). Anthropological interpretation can be conceived as translation only if we recognize that a successful translation may potentially change our very language; for indeed, as Walter Benjamin has said, the success of the translation of a significant text depends on our very ability to transform our language - i.e. our modes and habits of thought and action. By extension, these latter include our institutional contexts of interpretation, our 'disciplines' and their regimes of truth and scientificity, and the organization of power relations within the global system. An adequate anthropological interpretation must then include not only 'translation' but also an account of 'how power enters into the process of "cultural"translation" [which must be] seen both as a discursive and as a non-discursive practice' (163). An instance of this *discursive* power - and the non-discursive power it banks on - is Gellner's very influential formulation of the interpretive process. The model of language and writing here serves to blind us to an entire history that is embedded in the processes of 'logical assessment' and decoding meaning. Gellner arrogates to himself the 'privileged position' of the interpreter in the very extent that he wishes, as anthropologist, not to interrogate his very real control of the entire operation of this translation, 'from field notes to printed ethnography'. His 'is the privileged position of someone who does not, and can afford not to, engage in a genuine dialogue with those he or she once lived with and now *writes* about' (155).

Gellner's 'privileged position' is both theoretically and historically specific. The Whiggish tone of the essay betrays more than a simple emotional attitude; it in fact points to a philosophical confidence in a narrowly defined Reason to lay bare the world, a deeply entrenched belief in the adequacy of his 'logical assessment' of the 'assertion' of the other culture in comprehending its underlying social function. Gellner's 'logic' encompasses the entire space of the globe and its meanings; complexity of contextual function and meaning in every conceivable other space is granted only a limited autonomy since its essential terms remain formulated by the terms of Gellner's discursive world. Asad points out the ways in which this view is historically convenient since it blinds the social anthropologist to the contexts of power she or he inhabits; a sophisticated relativist would add to this an account of the ways in which Gellner significantly misunderstands the complexities of his object of study by reducing them to translatable 'assertions'.

NEW FORMATIONS

III THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF RELATIVISM

It is important to note that our analysis of Gellner's reduction of complex cultural objects to 'assertions' should not ignore his legitimate insight that the 'incoherences' of assertions and concepts of a given culture can indeed be 'socially functional' (42), that they do not need to be logically clear, distinct, and coherent ideas in order for us to be able to study their significance. What he fails to recognize, however, is that this is an issue entirely different from the presence of varying criteria of 'rational' judgement in different cultures. In other words, the fact that assertions or beliefs may be incoherent in a significant way does not diminish the interpretive complexity of the anthropologist's task in determining the specific terms with which they must be evaluated. And the issue raised by the sophisticated relativist is simply that these terms, these criteria of rationality, may vary significantly from culture to culture. Before we develop our understanding of this position in order to be clear about what exactly is involved in the significant variance of criteria of rationality, it might be best to see what the extreme relativist position involves, and why it is more than a bit problematical.

Now, the most extreme relativist formulation of the problem would be that there are no common terms between and among these rationalities, that the spaces different cultures define are entirely different from one another. Reacting sharply to the ahistorical vision underlying Gellner's Whiggery, the extreme relativist would point to the necessity of restoring to our critical perspective the presence of a plurality of spaces and values, the plurality of criteria of judgement and rationality implicit in the different cultural and historical contexts. Gellner's narrow conception of rationality, it would be easy to argue, is predicated on a false and reductive view of modern history as unproblematically One: guided by reason, obeying the logic of progress and modernization. Gellner's model of history is one that should belong to the prehistory of a critical anthropology. For in our 'postmodern' world, history is no longer feasible; what we need to talk about, to pay attention to, are histories - in the plural. This position builds on the pervasive feeling in the human sciences these days that the grand narrative of history seems a little embarrassing; what we need to reclaim instead, as is often pointed out in cultural criticism and theory, is the plurality of our heterogeneous lives, the darker and unspoken densities of past and present that are lived, fought, and imagined as various communities and peoples seek to retrace and reweave the historical text. In the history of criticism, encountering for the first time the challenge of alternative canons defined by feminist, black, Third World scholars and others, this is initially not only a valuable critical idea but also the basis for an energizing critical-political project. After all, we have just been learning to speak of feminisms, instead of the singular form that implicitly hid the varied experiences of women's struggles along different racial and class vectors under the hegemonic self-image of the heterosexual white middle-class movement; we have learned to write 'marxism' without capitalizing the 'm', thereby pointing to the need to reconceive the relationship to some unitary originary source; we have, in effect, taught ourselves that if history was

available to us, it was always as a *text*, i.e. to be read and reread dialogically, and to be rewritten in a form other than that of a monologue, no matter how consoling or noble the latter's tone or import.

Plurality is thus a political ideal as much as it is a methodological slogan. But the issue of competing rationalities raises a nagging question: how do we negotiate between my history and yours? How would it be possible for us to recover our commonality, not the ambiguous imperial-humanist myth of our shared human attributes, which are supposed to distinguish us all from animals, but, more significantly, the imbrication of our various pasts and presents, the ineluctable relationships of shared and contested meanings, values, material resources? It is necessary to assert our dense particularities, our lived and imagined differences; but could we afford to leave untheorized the question of how our differences are intertwined and, indeed, hierarchically organized? Could we, in other words, afford to have *entirely* different histories, to see ourselves as living - and having lived - in entirely heterogeneous and discrete spaces?

It will not do, then, to formulate the issue of competing rationalities and histories in the rather simplistic terms of merely *different* rationalities and histories. For the extreme relativist position, despite its initial attraction, seems to be philosophically and politically confused. Every philosopher worth her salt will tell us that this kind of relativism is easily refutable. In fact, she will declare a little contemptuously, such a relativism is *self-refuting*. The argument - is summed up rather neatly in the following way: if the relativist position is that there can be nothing other than context-specific truth-claims, that the 'truth' of every cultural or historical text is purely immanent to its immediate context, then on what grounds should I believe the relativist? If the relativist says that everything is entirely context-specific, claiming that we cannot adjudicate among contexts or texts on the basis of larger - that is, more general - evaluative or interpretative criteria, then why should I bother to take seriously *that very relativist claim*? The point is that one cannot both claim to hold the relativist position and expect really to convince anyone who does not already believe the position; there is no serious way in which the relativist can ask me to take her seriously - in so far as she wishes to be consistent. There is a self-refutation built into the argument, and it renders relativism less a significant philosophical position than a pious - though not ineffectual - political wish.

The problem is, however, that a refutation of this sort is not quite relevant for the way relativist ideas operate in contemporary critical circles. It is rarely as an explicit and reasoned position that relativism appears; instead, as I have suggested, it is embedded in our critical gestures, in the kinds of questions we ask or refuse to raise.⁷ The more significant challenge would be to see whether there are political implications of the relativist position that the relativist would be interested in *not* bringing in with her in her baggage. And I think there is at least one rather serious problem in what relativism entails: to believe that you have your space and I mine; to believe, further, that there can be no responsible way in which I can adjudicate between your space - cultural and historical - and mine by developing a set of general criteria that would have

interpretive validity in both contexts (because there can be no interpretation that is not simultaneously an evaluation) - to believe both these things is also to assert something quite large. Quite simply, it is to assert that *all spaces are equivalent*: that they have equal value, that since the lowest common principle of evaluation is all that I can invoke, I cannot - and consequently need not - think about how your space impinges on mine, or how my history is defined together with yours. If that is the case, I may have started by declaring a pious political wish, but I end by denying that I need to take you seriously. Plurality instead of a single homogeneous space, yes. But also, unfortunately, debilitatingly insular spaces. Thus what needs to be emphasized is that this extreme relativist position - and extreme especially when its implications remain inadequately thought out - is in no way a feasible theoretical basis of politically motivated criticism. It is in fact a dangerous philosophical ally, since it is built on, at best, naive and sentimental reasoning. To the extent that our initial interest in relativism was motivated by a political respect for other selves, other spaces, other contexts, relativism seems now to be an unacceptable theoretical position. For it might encourage a greater sensitivity to the contexts of production of cultural ideas, but it will not, given the terms of its formulation, enable what Talal Asad calls for - a 'genuine dialogue' between anthropologist and native, the ex-colonizer and the ex-colonized.

The sophisticated relativist would not simply deny Gellner's kind of claim that the west's rationality can unproblematically evaluate the beliefs and practices of the other culture, but would also wish to distance herself from the position of extreme relativism that commits us all to radically separate and insular spaces. A genuine dialogue of the kind Asad envisions would become possible only when we admit that crucial aspects of the non-western culture may have a great degree of coherence as part of a larger web of ideas, beliefs and practices, and moreover that *some* of these aspects may be untranslatable to the language of the western anthropologist's culture in terms of its historically sedimented and institutionally determined practices of knowing. The classic example encountered by anthropologists in this context is the practice of 'magic' and ritual. From the point of view of the modern west, of course, these practices might be seen as coherent and of a piece with an entire form of life, but interpreted more rigorously they could reveal a 'primitive' system of belief and an 'irrational' practice. Magical rites are patently 'unscientific' when the primitive culture pursues them despite the lack of observable or tabulatable evidence that they do have the effects they are supposed to have. Rituals surrounding the planting of crops, for instance, may be practised because of the belief that they bring about the right kind of weather and, if this were observed to be true, the practice of such rituals would have at least *an* intelligible basis in reason. But what if, as the anthropologist may well note in instance after instance, the practice of this ritual continues despite the absence of any correlation between it and the weather? In that case should the practitioners not be considered irrational in their practice of at least this ritual, and quite possibly unscientific in their use of magic and ritual generally?

The philosopher Peter Winch argues in his famous essay 'Understanding a

primitive society' that it would be wrong to come to even this conclusion.⁸ Conducting a debate with Alasdair MacIntyre, who argues something like the above concerning the practices of the Azande, Winch points out how important it is to specify with greater care the details of the context. For it may be that the Zande practice of magic and ritual can go hand in hand with a clear working distinction between practices and knowledges that are technical and those that are magical. In this case - and indeed this is the case according to the anthropological account of the Azande by Evans-Prithard, which both Winch and MacIntyre are discussing - Zande magic cannot be subsumed into the western category of the 'unscientific'. Since Zande practices exist in a larger web constituted in part by the magical-technical opposition, Zande magic could be considered (merely) unscientific only if the Azande *confused* it with their technical practices. In the case where a clear distinction exists between magical and technical practices, a one-to-one translation across cultures that ignores the intention of the practitioners becomes either misleading or at least grossly reductionist. According to Winch, the significant hermeneutical problem in this context can be raised through a kind of dialogue between the western web of beliefs and practices and the Zande one. Thus he considers it important to recognize 'that *we* do not initially have a category that looks at all like the Zande category of magic' (102). This is the source of the difficulty but also the beginning of an answer: 'Since it is *we* who want to understand the Zande category, it appears that the onus is on us to extend our understanding so as to make room for the Zande category; rather than to insist on seeing it in terms of our own ready-made distinction between science and non-science' (102). The reason this would constitute the beginning of a *dialogue* is that 'we' are forced to extend our understanding by interrogating its limits in terms of Zande categories of self-understanding. This dialogue marks the true hermeneutical moment rather than the explanation - or, worse yet, the 'logical assessment' (Gellner) - of a discursive object. Two systems of understanding encounter each other to the very extent that both are contextualized as forms of life; this encounter leaves open the possibility of a fundamental change in both. If we recall the basic issues raised by the passages I quoted at the beginning of this essay, it will be clear how this kind of hermeneutical encounter provides at least one solution to the problem posed by the Other.

Winch's achievement consists in showing us that we need to respect other cultures not as insular and impenetrable wholes but rather as complex webs of beliefs and actions. He does this by emphasizing what I have just discussed: that notions of rationality cannot be unproblematically applied across cultures precisely because there are different - and *competing* - rationalities, and one must acknowledge this fact in order to appreciate the specific modalities of actions and beliefs in a given culture. The relationship between cause and effect in cultural practices, for instance, can be understood at different levels. The Zande magical rites performed during the planting of crops need not necessarily be understood by the Azande themselves as leading to (i.e. having the effect of) a certain change in the weather. It would clearly be an improper interpretation, then, to consider these rites as unscientific or irrational, since

the Azande have other purely technical practices that are meant to influence conditions related to the planting of crops and the harvest; it would be wrong, in short, to see these magical rites as 'misguided' technical practice. The distinction between technical practices and magical ones should alert us to the fact that magic may serve functions that are of a different *order* altogether. Here is the way Winch explains the idea of different orders, i.e. different levels of human practice:

A man's sense of the importance of something to him shows itself in all sorts of ways; not merely in precautions to safeguard that thing. He may want to come to terms with its importance to him in quite a different way: to contemplate it, to gain some sense of his life in relation to it. He may wish thereby, in a certain sense, to *free* himself from dependence on it. I do not mean by making sure that it does not let him down, because the point is that, *whatever* he does, he may still be let down. The important thing is that he should understand *that* and come to terms with it. Of course, merely to understand that is not to come to terms with it, though perhaps it is a necessary condition for so doing, for a man may equally well be transfixed and terrorized by the contemplation of such a possibility. He must see that he can still go on even if he is let down by what is vitally important to him; and he must so order his life that he still *can* go on in such circumstances.

(103-4; emphases in the original)

The terms with which Winch formulates the discussion in this rich passage make clear that to conceive magical rites as complex practices not reducible to the rational-irrational or scientific-unscientific polarities of the west involves a deeper conception of human practices in general - i.e. in all societies - as complex in their modalities of intention and meaning. As suggested earlier, the notion of cause and effect is itself one that needs to be interpreted according to its specific modalities. Even within the anthropologist's culture one recognizes the quite different conceptions of causal influence when one speaks of 'what made Jones get married' as opposed to, say, 'what made the airplane crash' (103). Not to acknowledge these differences is simply - as we say in contemporary criticism - to 'read' badly. Thus, the most useful lesson that the sophisticated relativist teaches us is that we cannot understand complex cultural acts by reducing them hastily to their propositional content; indeed the reduction often involves basic kinds of misreading and misidentification. And to the extent that we define 'rationality' on the basis of such terms as logical consistency or the pragmatic choice of means for our technical ends, Winch's arguments as I have presented them would challenge this most fundamental of our concepts.

IV CULTURE, RATIONALITY AND HUMAN AGENCY: THE LIMITS OF OTHERNESS

The key issue is, of course, whether there can be more to the idea of rationality - or culture - than this. For even though he discusses the ways in which different cultures can learn from one another, Winch does not quite face up to the question inherent in his own idea of *competing* rationalities.

Difference teaches us not merely new technical possibilities, Winch tells us, but also new and possible forms of life. And he is right in emphasizing this. Criteria of rationality are connected to what we call 'culture', the larger moral and imaginative patterns through which we deal with our world. However, content as he is with definitions of rationality and cultural practices at the most general level, seeing cultures only as coherent systems, Winch underestimates the complexity of the question of evaluative comparison among these rationalities and cultures. (The absence of emphasis on evaluative comparison is, we recall, what makes a theoretical position ultimately a relativist one.) But such a comparison would necessarily be more rigorously interpretive, involving specification of the various elements and levels which constitute cultures as *articulated* wholes. Winch's cross-cultural comparison of 'forms of life' is pitched at such a high level of generality that his versions of human culture and rationality cannot register and include significant moral and imaginative practices and choices. If it is to constitute a relevant political interrogation, I would argue, the dialogue across cultures that we envision anthropological interpretation at its best to be conducting must in principle be able to include the levels of ordinary, everyday activity. For this to be possible, we need a minimal conception of rationality that will help us understand human activities - both the grand and the humbler ones - as the actions of agents. Let me explain what I mean.

The Subject of Culture

For Peter Winch, the common point of all human cultures is the presence of a few 'limiting notions' - fundamental ideas that determine the 'ethical space' of all cultures, the space 'within which the possibilities of good and evil . . . can be exercised' (107). The three such notions Winch specifies are birth, sexuality, and death. Together they map the limits of possibility that define our lives for us, and consequently outline our ethical universe. According to Winch, then, it is in this universe that rationality has its moorings. I wonder, however, if we do not lose as much as we gain if we pitch the issues on this high a level. We are, according to Winch, rational creatures and can engage in a dialogue with those who are significantly different from us, but this difference is negotiated at such a level of generality that significant aspects of human life such as, for instance, the conditions in which we work, our struggles to forge political communities, or our varying conceptions of cultural identity and selfhood, remain unarticulated and indeed invisible. Winch's human cultures are individually rational, and they are capable of communicating with one another in a process of hermeneutical self-critique and interrogation. But the 'rationality' they share is not defined in terms specific enough to register and include a great deal of what we usually consider to be our significant practices and beliefs: it is defined merely as the overall *coherence* of the *whole*, the most general systematicity revealed in the way a culture's actions, beliefs, and intellectual judgements all hang together. Given such a broad definition, *most* of what constitutes our historical life, our humbler acts as social agents and thinkers, remains closed to transcultural dialogue - to the

very extent that these acts are not ultimately subsumable to birth, death, and sexuality, not registered in the systematicity of the whole. Winch's version of rationality - as inevitably tied in this way to the large cultural schemes by which we define and live our lives - has gained in moral suppleness over the positivist or the ethnocentric ones, but it seems to have forfeited much of its capacity to judge and interpret; it may have gained in amplitude but it has also become, as it were, tone-deaf. And in matters of culture - as in politics - so much of course depends on the *tone* of things.

A more specific commonality than the one Winch's definition would posit for all human cultures and societies is the one that is implicit in the very definition of 'culture' as social practice. The perspective of 'practice', as it has been proposed in several recent developments in social theory across disciplines and methodological approaches,⁹ does not necessarily involve the notion of a unitary and self-sufficient Subject as the author of its actions. The basic claims would include the following: humans make their world; they make their world in conditions they inherit and that are not all within their control; theoretically understanding this 'making' involves redefining social structures and cultural institutions as not simply given but *constituted*, and hence containing the possibility of being changed. Moreover, in this conception, humans are seen as individual and collective *agents* in their world; and their practices can be specified for analysis without a necessary reduction to their subjective beliefs and intentions. Of course, the agents' intentions and beliefs about their practices are not irrelevant (since they can be aware of their purposes and actions); but these beliefs cannot be considered the *sole* determinant of meaning. 'Culture' is thus best appreciated as defining the realm of human choices in (potentially) definable contexts, choices of individuals and collectives as potentially self-aware agents; it is constituted *in* (and *as*) history. It is the significance of this kind of agency that Winch's related definitions of culture and rationality fail to register adequately. What enables him to hold the relativist position with its overly general definitions of rationality and culture as large - imaginative and conceptual - schemes is the absence in his account of any further specification of the 'human', a specification that would make comparative interpretation and evaluation of ordinary human activity possible. One specification we need to make in literary and cultural criticism, I would argue, is through the conception of *agency* as a basic capacity shared by all humans *across cultures*. And in understanding the divide between 'us' and 'them', it is this common space we all share that needs to be elaborated and defined.

In terms of the problematics of modern social theory Winch remains, if by default and underspecification, on the side of those who privilege the role of structure and system at the expense of human agency in their interpretations of social phenomena. In literary and cultural criticism, developments associated with structuralism and poststructuralism in particular have made us aware of the way language and cultural and semiotic systems, seen as systems, determine both meanings and subject-positions. The political agendas of these movements have been tied to a genealogical analysis of European humanism, and a great deal of attention has been paid to the deconstruction of one of the

hallmarks of modern European history - the Subject, an effect of specific discursive and institutional forces masquerading as universal Man. In this archaeological critical climate, instances of positive elaboration of the human have been noticeably absent. This is, we recognize at first, due to a salutary caution: we are all familiar with accounts of 'the human' that are patently speculative and serve sexist, racist, and imperialist programmes. We are also aware of how historical knowledge can be used selectively to construct such accounts, and how these definitions can be made to serve dangerous political ends. But the larger question that a philosophical anthropology pursues (regarding the capacities, tasks, and limits that might comprise a specifically human existence) and its historical-philosophical problematic will not go away, quite simply because our analyses of social and cultural phenomena often involve acknowledged or implicit answers to this and related questions. To the extent that criticism deals with 'culture', i.e. it engages in the interpretation of texts and contexts in the light of what people - individually and collectively - do, think, and make of their lives, these questions regarding the *subject* of cultural practices will remain to be dealt with explicitly. A thoroughgoing deconstruction of 'humanism' and its self-authorizing Subject is less an avoidance of this issue than, first and foremost, a clearing of the ground for reconsidering the problems involved.

It is in the context of political criticism, with its specific concern with other values, texts, and cultures, that the need for a minimal account of the human, defining a commonality we all share, becomes immediate and clear. Donald Davidson has shown us in a series of recent essays the extent to which an interpretation of the Other is dependent on an acknowledgement of common ground. Arguing against the general idea of radical untranslatability (between conceptual schemes, cultures, rationalities, etc.) that an extreme relativist position assumes. Davidson has stressed that we appreciate differences to the very extent that we acknowledge our pool of shared words, thoughts, and ideas.¹⁰ Indeed, 'we *improve* the clarity and bite of our declarations of difference . . . by *enlarging* the basis of shared (translatable) language or of shared opinion' (197; emphases added). Davidson concludes the famous essay in which he argues this by saying that there is no 'intelligible' basis for the position that all cultures, rationalities, and languages are so radically different that we cannot translate any portion of one to the other at all; at the same time, the fond belief that all humankind shares 'a common scheme and ontology' (198) is one that is not - yet - convincing either. Winch's 'rationalities' are homologous to what Davidson calls 'schemes' here, and I think it would be important to recognize the ways in which the competition among rationalities must be conceived, beyond Winch's own account, *by specifying and elaborating shared terms, ideas, and spaces*. The shared ground helps us situate and specify difference, understand where its deepest resonances might originate. If (as I argued against the relativist position earlier) we are to deal seriously with other cultures and not reduce them to insignificance or irrelevance, we need to begin by positing the following minimal commonality between us and them: the

capacity to act purposefully, to be capable of agency and the basic rationality that the human agent must in principle possess.

But what exactly does a specifically *human* agency imply? It does not involve simply *doing* things, such as fetching a bone or building a nest. Animals and birds are capable of such things, but we do not attribute to them the kind of agency that is so crucial to defining practices and, collectively, cultures. It is not even that our actions are purposive and theirs are not, since animals do in fact act purposefully with an end in view and with varying degrees of organizational economy. But what, by our most careful contemporary philosophical accounts, distinguishes us from animals is that we possess the capacity for a certain kind of second-degree thoughts, i.e. not merely the capacity to act purposefully but also to *evaluate* actions and purposes in terms of larger ideas we might hold about, say, our political and moral world, or our sense of beauty or form. This capacity underlies the distinction some philosophers make between the vague generic definition we might have of a member of the human species and a fuller concept of the human 'person': the former is a conceptually unspecific, purely descriptive term, while the latter begins to define the terms and categories with which we act and learn, participate in a community, and are held accountable. It is this capacity for a second-order understanding and evaluation which enables us to be critically and cumulatively self-aware in relation to our actions, that defines human agency and makes possible the sociality and the historicity of human existence. It is this theoretical ability in effect to possess a meaningful history that we cannot afford to deny to the cultural Other if we are to interpret it.

To go back to our earlier example about the Azande, it would need to be specified that their magical rituals that do not make sense to 'us' are *at the very least* the actions of agents in the sense I have just outlined. They cannot, in theory, be unintelligible and meaningless, not simply because they accord with the larger cultural and rational pattern whereby the Azande organize their lives and their values (as Winch would point out) but rather because of the more specific point that the rituals are social practices, open to us for analysis (and comparative evaluation) in terms of motives, meanings, and larger goals. But in analysing rituals as practices, we also understand that the agents do not themselves need to be fully conscious of purpose, direction, and meaning. Indeed, rituals are a specific kind of social practice in which the role of human agency needs to be appreciated in its historically sedimented and collective dimension: most of the practitioners of the Zande ritual may well be unaware of the original intention and purpose of these activities now, which may have become dense and inscrutable in relation to contemporary individual or collective motivations. Nevertheless, no matter how apparently bizarre their manifestations, these rituals, as social and cultural phenomena, can be understood to the extent that we see them as practices that 'they', the practitioners, can *in principle* themselves understand. In a word, 'we' have no way of understanding 'them' until we allow them a history, i.e. grant to their actions the minimum basis of intelligibility that in principle human agents have of their actions. Needless to say, this would hold true for their values, their texts, and their languages.

Evaluating otherness

To return to our discussion of relativism, then, we can see why it is important to go beyond a simple recognition of *differences* across cultures. For 'they' do ultimately what 'we' do, since they share with us a capacity for self-aware historical agency. If their terms, categories, and solutions are fundamentally different from ours, we have identified not merely a difference but what Charles Taylor calls an 'incommensurability'. Incommensurable activities are different, according to Taylor's useful distinction, but 'they somehow occupy the same space'; 'The real challenge is to see the incommensurability, to come to understand how their range of possible activities, that is, the way in which they identify and distinguish activities, differs from ours.'¹¹ The 'range of possible activities' outlines the space of 'culture', but in this definition culture is grounded in a specific and important common feature. The centrality of practice in this understanding of culture, emphasizing the social actions of individuals and collectives in definable situations, enriches our notion of difference by historicizing it. Only when we have defined our commonality in this way can the why-question, about the reason underlying different practices and different choices, become not only intelligible but also *necessary*. For given this essential common space, otherness appears not in the form of insularity or in a relationship of mere contiguity, but as a complex historical phenomenon, available to us only through a process of hermeneutical comparison and specification. Mere difference leads, as I said earlier, to a sentimental charity, for there is nothing in its logic that necessitates our attention to the other. Winch's sophisticated relativism emphasizes the ethical dimension, but to the extent that it too remains underspecified in its conception of rationality, its political implications are at best vague. The rationality that a political cultural criticism cannot afford to ignore is one that is implicit in the very definition of human agency sketched above, as the capacity that all human 'persons' and 'cultures' in principle possess to understand their actions and evaluate them in terms of their (social and historical) significance for them. It is this issue that relativism, in both the extreme and the sophisticated formulations I have discussed, obscures.

I do not see how political criticism (poststructuralist or otherwise) can afford to deny this minimal rationality that is implicit in human agency or avoid theorizing what it entails. Consideration of the question of rationality is unnecessarily complicated if we confuse the kinds of basic definitional issues I have been outlining here with the philosophical search for large schemes we have traditionally called Reason, whether in any of its positivist garbs, or as the more dialectical 'communicative rationality' that Habermas has been seeking. Reason formulated as the grand foundational structure that would subtend (and hence explain) all human capacities and ground all knowledge is now probably best seen as a noble but failed dream. But that does not mean either that there is no rational component to human actions, or - more crucially - that we can afford to (philosophically) ignore this rationality. Drawing on cognitive psychological theory, Christopher Cherniak has argued recently¹² against Cartesian attempts to define the ideal epistemic agent, since

'the fact that a person's actions fall short of ideal rationality need not make them in any way less intelligible to us'. Often, he argues, 'we have a simple explanation of why the person cannot accomplish all inferences that are apparently appropriate for him - namely, that he has finite cognitive resources'. But that, according to Cherniak, need not be cause for despair; rather, recognizing that human agency can be defined only in the context of this unavoidable finitude is an essential precondition for understanding the rationality of agenthood and for orienting our search towards a 'context-sensitive' reason rather than a 'highly idealized' one. My attempt in this paper has been to explain why, since for political criticism the concern with agency must be crucial, it would be debilitating at the present moment to confuse the claims of an ideal and comprehensive Reason with the basic capacities we can identify and define only in terms of the minimal rationalities they involve.

Moreover, once we understand that human rationality need not simply be a formal matter, as positivists insist, but is instead a fundamental capacity for articulation that underlies our social actions and enables us to be historical creatures, we can begin to realize what else is at stake in all this for political criticism. So long as we base our political analyses of culture on relativist grounds, avoiding the challenge posed by the competing claims of various (cultural) rationalities, we will surrender complex historical knowledge of Others to sentimental ethical gestures in their direction. We might remain wary of ethnocentric evaluation of alterity, but there is a basic evaluation involved in positing connections, perceiving similarities and differences, organizing complex bodies of information into provisionally intelligible wholes. Central to this process of evaluative judgement, with its minimal tasks of ordering and creating hierarchies of significance, is the understanding of humans across cultural and historical divides as capable of the minimal rationality implicit in agency. This cross-cultural commonality is one limit our contemporary political notions of difference and otherness need to acknowledge and theorize.

There are immediate practical considerations involved in all of this. In criticism, for instance, the call for respect for alternative canons can be made on the basis of a purely liberal respect for other literatures and experiences, but that will not necessarily comprise a challenge to the dominant order to the very extent that alternative canons are seen simply as coexisting peacefully in a pluralistic academy. If what I have said about the inadequacy of a logic of difference is convincing, the charity evident in institutional pluralism may in fact hide a more fundamental indifference. For in the study of modern literatures, the most crucial political question that arises concerns a history 'we' all share, a history whose very terms and definitions are now being openly contested and formulated. When pluralist arguments are used to support the proliferation of various minority canons and discourses, the question of historical imbrication, indeed the question of this unequal history itself, is obscured by a narrowly pragmatic logic. The study of minority literatures, for instance, can be defended on the ground that an adequate definition of literature must include all of 'its' variant forms and all the various human experiences they represent. The difficulty with this formulation is that its

vagueness leaves it open to all kinds of ironic recuperation. After all it was only a few months ago, when the Moroccan-French writer Tahar Ben Jelloun won France's prestigious Goncourt Prize, that President Mitterrand found it possible to describe the event as further evidence of the universality of the French language. Ben Jelloun, the first North African writer to win this prize, writes in both French and Arabic and has remained a critic of both the Moroccan regime and the racist practices of the French against North African immigrants. To read - and teach - his works as evidence of the universality of the French language, or even of the rich diversity of the human experience, is precisely to erase the specificity of the postcolonial immigrant writer, ambivalently situated in the belly of the imperial beast.¹³ Ignoring the history of colonialism by merely celebrating God's literary plenty, the pluralist critic would be no different here from the socialist President in containing the potential significance of any otherness. One way for criticism to battle such historical amnesia would be to stress the complex agencies of both the colonizers and the colonized that are evident in cultural production and consumption. In fact, it is in the imbrication of these agencies that cultural configurations of colonial histories, of patterns of domination and the resistances to them, can be traced and understood.¹⁴ The academy's eager acceptance of alternative canons - defined often as dehistoricized, formal constructs - suggests the urgent need to go beyond purely *literary*-historical reformulations.¹⁵

One function of political criticism, as I said earlier, is to identify the social interests that the reading and writing of literature serve. These interests can be variously oppressive or liberating; and there is nothing inherent in the texts themselves that can control and limit the uses to which they are put or the meanings and values they are made to deploy. We cannot understand the interests of different social groups or different political visions of the world, however, without historical specification; a general rhetoric of alterity reveals structures and systems, not the terms and conditions through which individual and collective experiences can be identified. Our formulation of such terms and conditions is dependent on a positive elaboration of the varieties of cultural and political practice, and on a theoretical understanding of human agency. For despite the mystifications of, the numerous ideologies of the Subject it would be a little too soon to conclude that humans have not acted, believed, and attempted to make and remake their worlds. This has happened in the Third World as much as in the First. To the extent that we specify the common terms on the level of human practice, and seek to articulate and understand our contexts, goals, and possibilities, we consider human history potentially intelligible, and the individual and collective actions of humans open to rational analysis. Notwithstanding our contemporary slogans of otherness, and our fervent denunciations of Reason and the Subject, there is an unavoidable conception of rational action, enquiry, and dialogue inherent in this political-critical project, and if we deny or obscure it we ought at least to know at what cost.

NOTES

A slightly different version of this article appeared in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2 (Spring 1989). The arguments presented here are also developed in my forthcoming book *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* (Oxford: Blackwell).

- 1 Patrick Gardiner, 'German philosophy and the rise of relativism', *The Monist* 64 (April 1981), 138-54. Useful recent discussions of relativism, with good bibliographies, can be found in Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (eds), *Rationality and Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982) and M. Krausz and J. Meiland (eds), *Relativism: Cognitive and moral* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982). See also the earlier publication, Bryan Wilson (ed.), *Rationality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970; rpt 1985).
- 2 Philip Lewis, 'The post-structuralist condition', *Diacritics*, 12, 1 (Spring 1982), 2-24. Lewis argues convincingly that most of the characteristics we usually ascribe to 'post-structuralism' in literary-critical circles do not in fact represent a new theory as much as a radicalization of classical structuralism. In this article I use the term poststructuralism, unhyphenated and unemphasized, to refer to a general tendency in literary theory, a tendency evident as much in gestural and stylistic claims as in argument or analysis. (For a critique of a particularly influential version of American deconstruction, that developed by Paul de Man, see my 'Radical teaching, radical theory: the ambiguous politics of meaning', in *Theory in the Classroom*, ed., C. Nelson [Urbana, Ill. and London: University of Illinois Press, 1986].)
- 3 The quotations are taken from: Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972), 11-12; Helene Cixous, 'The laugh of the Medusa', in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds), *New French Feminisms* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 263-4, 260; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London: Verso, 1985), 2.
- 4 Useful studies of this phenomenon include: Talal Asad (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (London: Ithaca Press, 1973); George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An experimental moment in the human sciences* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986); James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1986); George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1987), esp. ch. 7; Douglas A. Lorimer, 'Theoretical racism in late-Victorian anthropology 1870-1900', *Victorian Studies* 31, 3 (Spring 1988), 405-30; and, of course, for a more general account, Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978). For a feminist critique of some of the dominant anthropological categories, see Felicity Eldhom, Olivia Harris, and Kate Young, 'Conceptualising women', *Critique of Anthropology*, 3, 9/10 (1977); and for a productive encounter between anthropological concepts and a global materialist history, Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1982). For an analysis of politically motivated scholarship about the Third World which unselfconsciously reproduces larger patterns of discursive colonization, see Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under western eyes: feminist scholarship and colonial discourses', *boundary 2*, 12, 3/13, 1; revised version in *Feminist Review*, 30 (1988).
- 5 Ernest Gellner, 'Concepts and society', in Wilson, *Rationality*, 18-49; Talal Asad,

'The concept of cultural translation', in Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*, 141-64. Further page references given in the text.

'Decolonizing anthropology' necessarily suggests a collective and historically specific project. I borrow the term from the special session held at the 1987 convention of the American Anthropological Association; a collection of essays with the same title is forthcoming.

One well-known instance might suffice here. The need to base political criticism in a space that is itself an articulation of several, of at least the dominant and the marginal, is what Myra Jehlen emphasizes in her valuable essay, 'Archimedes and the paradox of feminist criticism', *Signs*, 6, 4 (Summer 1981), 575-601. Jehlen uses her central metaphor of an Archimedean point for criticism to argue 'that a terrestrial fulcrum, a standpoint from which we can see our conceptual universe whole but which nonetheless rests firmly on male ground, is what feminists really need' (576). However, the fact that she does not examine further the problems of the relativist position she would seem to be attacking here leads to a strange vagueness. Thus, although in her conclusion she talks about 'points of contradiction as the places where we can see the whole structure of our world most clearly', she is able to see this as implying 'the immanent relativity of all perception and knowledge' (600, 601). If Jehlen means by this that comparative perspectives and analyses reveal the extent to which the different structures of perception and knowledge are produced in specific contexts, and are thus in part understandable in terms relative to these contexts, she has a point, but she seems to want to *suggest* more. For in the very next sentence she sees much larger consequences following from the above point: 'Thus, what appears first as a methodological contradiction, then becomes a subject in itself, seems finally to be shaping something like a new epistemology' (601). Accepting the legitimate relativist-contextualist insight about the significance of context helps us fight, say, andro- or ethnocentrism, but since that does not necessarily involve or entail changing the very ways in which we conceive of knowledge and the process of knowing, i.e. seeking a new *epistemology*, I am not sure what Jehlen's suggestion means here. Since she argues an anti-separatist or anti-relativist position throughout the essay, I see this suggestion at the end as a confusing vagueness rather than a contradiction in her argument; but it is at least evidence that her position would be clearer and stronger if she thought through the issue of relativism and what it entails.

It might be that cultural criticism is, at least at the present moment, particularly unconcerned about relativism as a problematic position. It would be illuminating to contrast Jehlen's essay with Sandra Harding's recent discussion of the implications of feminism for the social sciences: 'Introduction: is there a feminist method?' in *Feminism and Methodology*, ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1-14. Harding's strictures on relativists include a pertinent political diagnosis: 'Historically, relativism appears as an intellectual possibility, and as a "problem", only for dominating groups at the point where the hegemony (the universality) of their views is being challenged. As a modern intellectual position, it emerged in the belated recognition by nineteenth-century Europeans that the apparently bizarre beliefs and behaviors of non-Europeans had a rationality or logic of their own. Perhaps the preferred Western beliefs might not be the only reasonable ones. The point here is that relativism is not a problem originating in, or justifiable in terms of, women's experiences or feminist agendas. It is fundamentally a sexist response that attempts to preserve the legitimacy of androcentric claims in the face of contrary evidence' (10).

- 8 Peter Winch, 'Understanding a primitive society', in Wilson, *Rationality*, 78-111. Page references given in the text.
- 9 For an excellent summary and discussion, see R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987). The most original and ambitious work with this focus is Pierre Bourdieu's; see especially *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and, for a succinct formulation of his theory, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984). On the idea that social actions are 'recursive', i.e. never entirely original and always a form of revision of existing social meanings, see Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the theory of structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).
- 10 Donald Davidson, 'On the very idea of a conceptual scheme', in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 183-98.
- 11 The useful distinction between 'difference' and 'incommensurability' is developed in Taylor's essay, 'Rationality', in his *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers*, Volume 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 134—51, which contains a good discussion of Winch and one of the best accounts of what I have been calling a minimal conception of rationality (the quotations are from p. 145). Taylor considers our capacity for 'articulation' or laying things out 'in perspicuous order' the basic component of human rationality, although it is not quite clear whether he would consider this to be a historically or culturally universal phenomenon. There is a good account of the issues involved in conceiving a post-positivist rationality in Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and the essay 'Beyond historicism' in his *Realism and Reason: Philosophical Papers*, Volume 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 287-303. Many of these questions have been debated fruitfully by historians and philosophers of science.
- 12 Christopher Cherniak, *Minimal Rationality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 20.
- 13 The ambivalent relationship between contemporary minority writers and their 'metropolitan' audiences is highlighted in the context of Europe's new immigrant populations. At what may have been the first American conference on this subject, 'Europe's New Minority Cultures' (Cornell, February 1988), the issue of cultural appropriation and a critical pedagogy which would prevent that became a central issue in both the papers and the discussions which followed. I would like to mention in particular the presentations by Ted Chamberlain on 'Britain's new poetry' and Samia Mehrez on 'The Francophone North African cultural presence in France'.
- 14 Indeed, developments in the historiography of colonialism (e.g. New World slavery or colonial formations such as British India) as well as of post-colonial societies (focusing in particular on the roles of the peasantry and of women) suggest the extent to which the 'imbrication' of the agencies of the colonizers and the colonized is itself an image that demands further specification. Thus, it forces historians of anti-colonial struggles to go beyond the visible and institutionally organized nationalism of the middle classes in order to trace patterns of resistance in peasant movements and revolts, a kind of resistance colonial historians had been content to characterize as criminal acts or at best unselfconscious and inchoate upsurges of powerful feeling. In the context of South Asia, see Sumit Sarkar, *Modern Indian History: 1895-1947* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1983), for a useful survey of the 'history from below' approach. The ongoing work on the role of the

peasantry in Indian nationalist struggles can be followed in the pages of such journals as *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay), the *Journal of Peasant Studies* (London), *Modern Asian Studies* (Cambridge), as well as in the series of volumes titled *Subaltern Studies*, ed. R. Guha, published by Oxford University Press, Delhi. Questions of gender in the historiography of colonial India, and the difficult methodological issues raised by other uncoded practices of resistance, are dealt with cogently by Rosalind O'Hanlon in her recent review essay 'Recovering the subject: *Subaltern Studies* and histories of resistance in colonial South Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22, 1 (1988), 189-224. For the most detailed recent study of 'everyday' resistance, which extends our understanding of historical agency by focusing on non-insurrectionary practices, see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven, Conn, and London: Yale University Press, 1985). All these analyses of the historically imbricated agencies of the 'oppressed' and the 'oppressor' owe much to Eugene Genovese's path-breaking studies of North American slavery, especially *The World the Slaveholders Made* (1969) and *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974).

The most basic lesson of such historiographical developments for a colonial and post-colonial *cultural studies* is at the very least that we need to be wary of too easily distinguishing 'culture' from 'history'. Even more clearly than in contemporary analyses of metropolitan societies, the challenge for students of the Third World is to suspend the traditional notion of culture as a realm apart of sweetness and light. The rueful joke that the west possesses a history and a sociology, the Third World merely an anthropology, does have a point, especially about the racial-ideological biases inherent in modern disciplinary demarcations and territories. But we might do well to be wary of the convenient reaction to these biases which would consist in investing Third World societies with 'culture' in the traditional western mould (after all, that was what both the Orientalists and the early nationalists, in their own ways, tried to do), and be more ready to specify and re-examine notions of 'history' and 'culture' together. (For an account of 'race' as a historical process evidenced in cultural practices and tendencies, see my 'Kipling's children and the colour line', forthcoming in *Race and Class* in July 1989. For an analysis of 'agency' on a very different register, in the context of a contemporary poet who is often read as a 'postmodernist', see S. P. Mohanty and Jonathan Monroe, 'John Ashbery and the articulation of the social', *Diacritics* 17, 3.)

- 15 For an astute discussion of such issues, especially in the context of possible institutional appropriation of minority discourses, see Cornel West, 'Minority discourse and the pitfalls of canon formation', *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 1, 1 (Fall 1987), 193-201.