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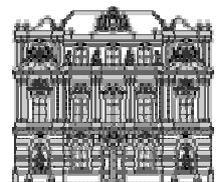
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**Evidence in Socio-Cultural Anthropology Today:  
Assessing the Potentials of Social Science Approaches**

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## **EVIDENCE IN SOCIO-CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY: ASSESSING THE POTENTIALS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE APPROACHES**

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Discussing the meaning and the culture of evidence for anthropologists today can be approached through several access roads. Philosophy, science studies, discourse and linguistic analysis, or history, for instance, may all be considered as representing valid and useful analytical inventories to that purpose. My argument today will discuss the potential merits of a re- invigorated, critical social science approach (Flyvbjerg 2001) to the topic of evidence in anthropology. This is pursued here not because I think that other approaches are less meaningful, but out of the consideration that a critical social science approach represents a basic transdisciplinary orientation which includes a strong potential for dialogue, and thus for bridging several gaps.

Traditionally, such an emphasis upon a social science approach would have been more self-understood in standard Western European rather than in average North American contexts of anthropology. Yet this has changed considerably in the last two decades or so. Today, a number of continental European sociologists and social theorists- such as Pierre Bourdieu or Juergen Habermas- are as influential among American as they are among European anthropologists. This might be a good sign, indicating the gradual emergence of a truly intercontinental and transnational community of anthropologists. At any rate, it represents one of the reasons why I think that in American anthropology today, conditions have greatly improved to re- consider social science approaches to topics such as evidence, which are basic to the epistemology and methodology of international anthropology.

Out of these initial deliberations, I want to discuss three points in my presentation today. First, I want to briefly reflect upon some of the creative tension that exists between subjectivism and objectivism, as it shows in the work of social science authors like Pierre Bourdieu and Juergen Habermas. Second, I will then try to apply these insights, gained from the first examination, for the neighboring anthropological fields and for socio- cultural anthropology, the latter through the example of the legal meaning of evidence. Thirdly, I will attempt to draw some conclusions out of this exercise for a social science approach to evidence in anthropology today.

## 1. Objectivism and Subjectivism in the Social Sciences

One of the main reasons why Pierre Bourdieu's work was received so enthusiastically, and was regarded as innovative and attractive in large segments of American academia, was his criticism of the objectivist traditions in the social sciences. It is true that particularly in his earlier works, Pierre Bourdieu focused to a considerable extent on overcoming a one-sided, hegemonic legacy of social science objectivism, which had ranged from Auguste Comte's classical positivism down to core elements of structuralism. It is also true that in order to overcome that hegemonic legacy of objectivism in the social sciences, he used the German idealist tradition in philosophy. For instance, the title of Bourdieu's early essay on Berber marriage strategies, "Kinship as Will and Idea", later published in "Outline of a Theory of Practice" (Bourdieu 1972) was an ironic one: intentionally and ironically, it paraphrased the title of a classic work of German idealism, namely Arthur Schopenhauer's "*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*" (from 1819), the World as Will and Idea.

Using that famous title from the *opus magnum* by Schopenhauer, whose social views were profoundly pessimistic and misanthropic, and whose personal views were bluntly suicidal, of course implied a silent ironic smile by someone like Bourdieu. He used that radical variant of German idealist subjectivism as a tool to question and criticize objectivism, but not as an end in itself. It seems that somehow that irony got lost, however, when Bourdieu's work was initially received as a supporting inventory in many early debates of American postmodernism and literary criticism. For some time, the Schopenhauerian thrust was taken dead serious here. It took quite a while until, in his late years, a somewhat angry and aggressive Bourdieu himself clarified to a wider public what actually, he had spelt out already in several passages of his major works: not only was subjectivism useful against objectivism, Bourdieu said, it also worked well the other way round. Some key elements of objectivism had to be retained and transformed, in order to stop the pendulum from swinging too much into the other direction (Bourdieu 1998).

German social theorists and sociologists reached similar epistemological conclusions, in related intellectual and political contexts that were different but parallel to the reciprocal criticism of subjectivism and objectivism by Bourdieu in France. Out of his predecessors' background of Critical Theory in Frankfurt and in US exile, Juergen Habermas criticized the philosophical legacy of enlightenment idealism that had been inspired by Kant and Hegel, through an objectivist stand that had been inspired by Marx, and vice versa, he worked for overcoming dogmatic objectivism in the Marxist manner through his emphasis on language, and on ideology, as derived from subjectivist legacies (Habermas 1976, 1988). By further elaborating some of these

perspectives in view of current phases of globalization, German sociologist Ulrich Beck has, to my mind at least, consolidated and expanded the basis on which we can move beyond the dichotomy of subjectivism vs. objectivism (Beck 1998).

Now, I am quite aware that much of what I have said so far will not be totally new for the present audience and readership. One may perhaps have different views about these works, and some might find them less attractive than others. But generally, all of these authors- Bourdieu, Habermas, Beck- are widely quoted and read in American academia. My point here, however, is that they not only offer valuable contributions to this or to that specialized topical debate, such as globalization, or discourse analysis, or social fields of power. This has been recognized and acknowledged. My point is that it is high time to also recognize and acknowledge that these authors represent a basic epistemological and methodological alternative to our topic of evidence, by jointly emphasizing a dialogical movement beyond the exclusivist and dichotomous arrangements of objectivism and subjectivism in the social sciences. It is precisely these existing aspirations in the social sciences and in cultural studies which, *en miniature*, we try to also pursue in our Vienna Wittgenstein-award research focus on interactions between “localized identities and wider influences”.

## 2. Some Key Meanings of “Evidence” in Academia

In the second section, I will first try to assess the role of evidence in some neighboring fields, before turning towards its legal meaning from a social science perspective for socio- cultural anthropology.

### 2a. Neighboring Fields of Anthropology

My argument with regard to evidence, about fully acknowledging an orientation of moving beyond the dichotomies of objectivism vs. subjectivism, can be further substantiated if we consider some of those fields close to socio- cultural anthropology where debates about evidence have played a crucial role, in one way or the other.

In the anthropological fields, physical or **biological anthropology** perhaps exemplifies the most explicit objectivist record concerning evidence. The physical and biological anthropological methodological inventory comprises hard data and the formulation of hypothesis, on the basis of which experiments and testing are being carried out, which may corroborate and confirm a hypothesis or rather, in Sir Karl Popper’ s sense, may lead towards the falsification of more unlikely hypotheses so that the more probable ones remain in usage. Here, **data which relate to hypotheses, and which are generated under accessible and replicable conditions** are at the core of what is accepted as evidence. Although some socio- cultural anthropologists may not be interested at all to reflect any further about this, I would like to at least remind you that the more refined objectivist epistemologies of the natural sciences do not flatly ignore the subjective element. Indeed, ever since Albert Einstein and Werner Heisenberg, those more refined objectivist epistemologies include key topics such as the “unknown”, or the “necessary imprecision”, and in general, of course, the “researcher’s perspective”.

By contrast, a number of other fields that are close to socio-cultural anthropology, such as **linguistic anthropology** and its intersections with discourse analysis and, to an extent, media studies and studies of the performative arts have to rely with a certain necessity upon a much stronger subjectivist record of dealing with evidence. Indeed, an individual act of performance through body or speech in a specific context may never be duplicated under comparable conditions at all. Likewise, its interpretation by the researcher may again depend on this researcher’ s very specific perspective, to such an extent that very little may remain that can still be assessed in any intersubjective manner by others. Yet that little remaining part is important. It includes documentation, and scholarly consultation and debate about the contents and the conditions of documentation. In fact, few researchers in linguistic anthropology, or in

performative arts for that matter, would be prepared to give up on that remaining part, which consists of a minimum that can be intersubjectively assessed on an empirical basis. So, one may well argue that beyond personal interpretation, beyond impression and opinion, there is **a remaining minimum part of intersubjective assessment and experience** which mostly represents the core elements of evidence among these more subjectivist records.

The equivalents of both records lead some kind of “**peaceful co- existence**” in **archaeological anthropology**, as much as in many other fields of historical research. On the one hand, there are large spheres of historical scholarship that require and impose the necessity of more or less justified, more or less subjective interpretation.

A specific archaeological site in South Arabia from 500 BC, for instance, may be interpreted by some as a holy shrine, by others as a pilgrims’ resting place, by others still as an astronomical observatory, or by a fourth group of scholars either as a combination of these three, or as something entirely different. At a certain point, however, those plausible and implausible, more or less original or highly and not so highly innovative interpretations will cross an invisible, fluid, and volatile threshold zone. Beyond that zone, interpretations of unclear evidence become obvious nonsense and illogical absurdities—for instance, when that site from 500 BC in South Arabia would be interpreted as an Aztec consulate, or as a Viking hotel. In the historical fields, we thus find a relatively wide “grey” or threshold zone, beyond which there are those two spheres: the necessary sphere of more or less subjective interpretations at one side of the grey zone, and to the other side, the sphere of the intersubjectively accepted and uncontested, or, the sphere of what is accepted as correct and incorrect, accepted as established knowledge or as obvious nonsense. In the course of academic and intellectual developments, the contents of these two spheres, and of the wide grey zone between them is constantly changing- yet as such, they exist at any moment in time.

With regard to cultures of evidence, we thus can basically identify **three dominant discourses and practices in our neighboring fields: first, a dominant discourse of objectivism with irreducible elements of subjectivism in the biological record; second, a dominant discourse of subjectivism with irreducible elements of objectivism in the linguistic and performative record; and third, a changing balance of co- existence between the two in the historical record.**

Depending on their respective interests and orientations, quite a few socio-cultural anthropologists will already find it rewarding enough to embrace, or to combine and to further explore, one or the other among these alternatives.

## 2b. The Legal Metaphor and Socio-cultural Anthropology

So far, I have tried to characterize three dominant ways of discourses and practices in neighboring fields. The notion of “dominant” implies, of course, a plurality of other discourses which also exist inside these fields, and in addition, several rich zones of intersection and interaction between them. In fact, developments in some of those interactive zones, such as those between the historical and the linguistic record regarding evidence, tend to support what I will now try to argue, before coming to my conclusions.

This next point will explore the potentials for a distinctive social science approach inside socio-cultural anthropology for dealing with evidence. For that purpose, let me consider the example of evidence in the legal sense, in order to assess how it may illustrate that movement beyond the objectivist-subjectivist dichotomy.

Inside and outside academia, a central social context of the meaning of evidence are legal studies and in general, a society’s legal system. Approaching the meaning of evidence as a legal term from a socio-cultural perspective does require a self-reflexive *caveat*. Previous modernist and objectivist traditions in socio-cultural anthropology did indeed use the legal metaphor of the “witness” who “had been there” in order to raise the authority of their own accounts beyond any challenge and any doubt. A more recent and rather postmodernist anthropology, often of a deconstructivist persuasion, successfully demonstrated the various biases that were nevertheless inherent to those authoritative accounts, and how they were articulated through stylistic and textual representations, and through gendered and colonial or ethnocentric perspectives (Clifford and Marcus 1986). These experiences and criticisms serve as valuable signposts inside socio-cultural anthropology, when we re-consider the legal meaning of evidence in a social science perspective.

On these grounds, let us consider the example of a trial. A more objectivist orientation from today can be expected to describe, but to basically take for granted, those procedures that define admissible and non admissible evidence, to describe and to analyze direct or testimonial evidence in this trial, and to assess indirect, demonstrative or circumstantial evidence, and their relation to

precedent cases and to the outcome of the trial. Such an objectivist approach towards legal evidence in a trial thus will analyse evidence in its relational and hierarchical contexts, and its processual and discursive transformation.

A more subjectivist orientation, by contrast, will question the face value of normative equality before the law and will contrast that to actual persons' unequal access to procedural strategies. It will point out that these imbalances of power inform the options available with regard to evidence, and it will demonstrate that involved participants have different interests and strategies to manipulate evidence according to their needs and options. Such a subjectivist approach towards evidence will therefore focus upon the conditions and interactions through which evidence is generated and manipulated, rather than taking for granted whatever happens to evidence during the trial.

There certainly are other ways through which one may identify subjectivist and objectivist access roads towards analysing legal evidence in context. Yet in terms of current debates in socio-cultural anthropology and in the social sciences in general, the perspective I have chosen here leads to an unambiguous conclusion: *By and large, the objectivist perspective on legal evidence is identical with today's systemic and processual approaches; while the subjectivist perspective largely intersects with actor-centred approaches.*

After all that has been said so far, it will not come as a surprise that – following Bourdieu, Habermas, and Beck in this regard- my argument is that we should cease to treat these social science variants of subjectivism and objectivism as mutually exclusive. In fact, we need both of these basic perspectives, and by this I mean that their peaceful co-existence may be necessary and sufficient for historical studies, but not for social science approaches. Here, we need both of them at the same time, that is simultaneously in one and the same coherent process of analysis. This is what I mean by a dialogical movement beyond any exclusivist dichotomy of subjectivism vs. objectivism.

Notions of process, of power, and of hierarchy could never be brought into the picture without any reference to wider systemic constraints, and how these, in turn, are affected by researchers' presence and their activities. Likewise, anthropology would be unable to pursue its established focus on personal experiences, perceptions, and performances, if it would lose sight of actors' involvement and agency, including the researcher's own involvement and impact.

If that is the case, then we may conclude by spelling out the consequences of this reconsideration of the legal metaphor for a social science approach to evidence in socio-cultural anthropology.

### 3. Conclusions

By contrast to the somewhat differing, dominant constellations in the biological, the linguistic, and the historical records, I have argued here for a movement of balanced, reciprocal dialogue of subjectivist and objectivist perspectives, of systemic, processual and actors- or experience-focused approaches, a dialogue that includes blending and fusing. Simultaneously, this requires self- reflexive emancipation from those bad legacies through which one always had insisted to exclude the other.

Within such emerging, synthetic frameworks, an element of “being a witness” and of “offering one’s testimony” indeed has to be retained as a healthy element from the objectivist legacy. This is engaged in regular, critical and self- critical dialogue with the subjectivist legacy, inspired by questions like “ a witness? But with what interest in mind, funded by whom and following which perspectives?” and “ testimony? But aquired under what kinds of conditions, and processed for whom, with what kinds of means, and for which end?”

If we pursue our research as socio- cultural anthropologists by answering to both kinds of questions, then we create indeed a dialogical culture of evidence inside socio-cultural anthropology, by leaving behind the old- fashioned, and indeed binary European dichotomy of subjectivism vs. objectivism.

In this perspective, a new social science understanding of evidence will emerge which still is going to be based on the ethnographic testimony of new forms of fieldwork, (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) by oneself and by others (Gingrich and Fox 2002), while simultaneously being open about the conditions, effects and goals under which fieldwork was carried out and its results are being processed.

**In this sense, evidence from a social science approach in socio- cultural anthropology is the theory- inspired and comparatively assessed result of new forms of self- reflexive and dialogical, open and responsible fieldwork.** This is my take on evidence, therefore: we have the option to create a new culture of evidence in socio-cultural anthropology.

I want to conclude, however, with a humble afterthought. Ultimately, such a line of reasoning inevitably will lead towards another crucial question: if “witness” and “testimony” remain important, although becoming thoroughly scrutinized, then how should such a social science notion of evidence be assessed in terms of “truth” and of “reality”?

I confess that I am unable to answer to that question at present. I only know that it is bound to come up. For my part, I know that I am unwilling to drop a basic commitment to “the truth and nothing but the truth” when it comes to carrying out fieldwork, or to publishing about it in a responsible manner.

But whether those notions of truth and of reality will relate to wider, interdisciplinary and philosophical discourses, or by contrast, whether we have to accept that each researcher has a personal experience and standard of truth and of reality, or whether, alternatively, anthropology is bound to envision its own truths and realities- - for that I simply have no answer yet. We all have our limits. Yet I do know what a social science preference for anthropology would aspire for. Intersubjectively shared, legitimate transdisciplinary concepts of truth and reality would have to represent the new cognitive basis for evidence.

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