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Contemporary anthropology is marked by intense self-conscious, occasionally self-serving, critique and a retreat from its vital aim of ethnographic analysis upon which is largely based the academic legitimacy of anthropology as a discipline worthwhile practicing. Nicholas Thomas's *Colonialism's Culture* exemplifies the trend away from ethnographic research and illustrates some of the dangers of this trend.

Thomas's thesis is simple. What he identifies as the culture of colonialism is not a homogeneous or unified phenomenon. How it manifests in diverse forms of discourse--in the traveler's tales of persons who variously lived or commented on colonial realities, novelists, tourists, administrators, anthropologists--is relative to time and place. This is a well-worn postmodernist point and unexceptionable. Thomas clearly aims to be more original so he distances himself critically from some of those (for example, Saïd and Fabian) whose approaches he, nonetheless, broadly endorses. The work may be generally understood as a sequel to Thomas's previous study, *Entangled Objects* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

A photograph in this text (that of 'a postcard of a small white girl holding the hands of two children of the colonized on each side) is now emblazoned on the cover of the more recent book. The analysis of photographs is an increasingly popular strategy of diverse postmodernist commentary. For Thomas, the photograph displays the infantilizing and racist possibilities of colonial discourse, a major theme of the book.

Thomas's interpretation of the 1910 postcard displays some of the analytical poverty of the book. Thomas describes the photograph as "remarkable." He acknowledges that it is difficult to argue from the position of the purchaser of such a postcard but, undeterred, he proceeds to excavate its meanings. He states that the postcard indicates a surface equivalence (all are equally innocent children) but it implies a more fundamental racism, hierarchy, and primitivism that are more evident in other photographs and texts. This strikes me as altogether a stronger possibility in the photograph itself than Thomas admits. The fully dressed white girl stands in a central position between the two loincloth-wearing black children. Her identity is fully expressed and this contrasts with the suppressed identities of the children whose hands she holds. The native children can be seen as even having their gender identity hidden. They are simply naked black kids. The girl is displayed with her feet authoritatively and stridently apart--a figure of firm, gentle, and guiding power? Such points, although relatively obvious, are not

clearly drawn by Thomas. I do not think it takes great analytical ability to do the kind of deconstruction that Thomas so often labors over in this book. His rhetorical strategy is one of appearing to pare away the subtle layers of meaning (the real and unconscious hegemonizing force of colonial discourses?). Obvious ones stand out--like power and the structuring of authority and domination in colonial regimes--but these are suppressed in this volume.

Thomas adopts a kind of Foucaultian strategy. His interest is not with the formal structures of power, the political economies of colonial and postcolonial regimes that have dominated modernist historical and sociological inquiry, but with apparently more innocent practices at the periphery of power: practices that appear disconnected from obvious systems of oppressive authority and hierarchy. The practices he concentrates upon appear as the "liberal" or progressive front of otherwise dominating and imprisoning power. Here, Thomas might have followed a Foucaultian line more adeptly, a line that he indicates from the word go.

Thus, the book opens with a scene set in the anthropologist's Canberra kitchen. While making breakfast Thomas overhears a radio talk where a present situation of racial tolerance is asserted against the intolerant difference of a racist past. The continuity of a colonially constructed racism into the discourses of the present is one of the strong implications of the book. But he seems, almost naively, blithely unaware of his own bourgeois positioning and the fact that he is speaking with an authorial voice centered in Australia's postcolonial capital, the heart of apparatuses of moral surveillance for the production of good citizens in Australia. Foucault and other deconstructionists have seen the complicity of scholarship and of science in the discourses integral to the formation of the modern state. Thomas's own criticisms of anthropologists and of other scholars with whom he is broadly aligned has the appearance of a Foucaultian radical stance. But to my mind his criticisms lack bite and this is especially so with regard to the continuing, often state-sanctioned, discriminatory disadvantaging and denial of the plight of aborigines. Thomas in his criticisms is often too ready to express state-sponsored progressivist moralisms of the very kind that scholars like Foucault would be suspicious.

The work does not merit Fabian's (a scholar who sees his own work of anthropological deconstruction as paralleling that of Foucault) accolade on the jacket. I for one would have liked to have seen a closer inspection of missionary texts and the discourses of colonial medicine in the Fijian context (where Thomas claims considerable authority) than Thomas provides.

Thomas does not identify connections and transmutations in the discourse of the texts that would indicate disjunctions and shifts in the forma-

tion of colonial and postcolonial state orders. In other words he does not carefully outline the forces that have shaped postcolonial realities and the reformation of the past in the present that is also a future. I stress that the exploration of colonial and postcolonial discourse is a wonderful field to investigate and especially so in the contexts of contemporary processes involving hitherto colonially oppressed minorities. Thomas's exercise is highly important for comprehending the diverse regimes of power that may characterize what is called "postcoloniality." Colonial political orders are to be seen as forerunners of the contemporary surveillance state. The methods whereby colonizers intervened within and transformed the life domains and practices of those they controlled is apparent in the details of missionary practice, health and medical administration, colonial descriptions of cultural and social customs and how they were to be protected or secured, colonial bureaucratic discourse, and so forth. In such details are the preliminary formations of so many, usually state-mediated, contemporary political worlds. But Thomas skims his materials too easily and reiterates tried and true observations--such as primitivism in the representation of indigenous peoples--that have been better argued by other scholars.

Thomas takes what by now are ritual swipes at major modernist anthropological scholars, Geertz and Dumont for example. Sometimes these are a little too shallow. There are, surprising as it may seem to some, arguments in both Geertz's and Dumont's work that prefigure approaches that would appear otherwise critical of them. While Dumont is undoubtedly a totalizing thinker, he is fascinated with the genealogies of contemporary discourse and how they are transmutations of earlier forms. The colonial context of India is a regime of power that displays some of the dynamics ushering in modernity. In Dumont's understanding, the individualism that took root in India under British colonial rule gave rise to new forms of oppression through an idiom of liberalism. This is not so far away from Foucault's perspective on the process of the emergence of post-Enlightenment and ostensibly liberating discursive formations relevant to new power regimes in Europe and exemplified in Foucault's studies, *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish*. Dumont radically criticizes anthropological texts on India (largely those of the British social anthropological tradition) for being thoroughly concerned with the application of concepts founded in modern liberalism. Such texts, he argues, contribute to a false stereotypy of Indian village practices and a deeply prejudiced vision of India as a whole--indeed the kind of prejudice that enabled British colonial power to legitimate itself as a liberalizing force. Thus, India is invented by anthropology and other social scientists as an archetype of inequality that only modern reforms of the kind initiated in

Europe will overcome. Dumont attacks such perspectives and the kind of anthropology associated with them.

Dumont is eminently criticizable, but Thomas's failure to grasp the direction of his argument not only distorts Dumont but supports a kind of postmodern view of certain scholars that refuses major similarities in argument. This refusal is masked in a sham radicalism that covers up, as with Thomas when compared with Dumont, an altogether weaker position.

I started this comment on Thomas by stressing anthropology as an ethnographic discipline and concerned in diverse ways with the careful attention to practices. This emphasis has received a renewed focus in recent years, often under the influence of postmodern developments. Foucault and other priests of the movement have not just questioned how accounts of practice have been presented but have been acutely attentive to developing approaches to the investigation of practices that avoid the manifest distortions and oversystematization, for instance, of positivist empiricism. Thomas presents an interpretation of texts that I find far more superficial than the interpretive culturalism of a Geertz. Indeed, Thomas's expressed concern with the cultures of colonialism brings him close to a Geertzian strategy with its assumptions of local holism and deep-seated cultural codes waiting to be cracked.

I have chosen to discuss Thomas in the context of Foucault. The latter presents an approach highly influential for Thomas but has a far greater respect for empirical detail, for ethnography in fact. Anthropology began as an armchair discipline, and in the hands of anthropological scholars like Thomas it evinces a danger of returning to these roots. There is almost a Frazerian butterfly-collecting feel to Thomas's text. A couple of *Boy's Own* novelists here, the writings of odd missionaries and journalists there, an apparently randomly selected postcard or two, and so forth. There is no relentless interrogation of materials that marks the best of many deconstructionist and postmodernist analyses. Anthropologists have had great opportunities to investigate in depth the colonial practices within which the history of the peoples they studied were often so thoroughly embedded. They had access to the writings of local administrators and the chance to investigate the discursive formations of colonialism and postcoloniality that infused the everyday worlds in whose realities they participated. With some exceptions anthropologists largely avoided such important concerns. It took a new generation of scholars who were usually not anthropologists to expose the neglect. Thomas has seen the lack, but this study seems to be in nowhere land. It refuses the value of the anthropologist's insistence on ethnography and refuses the intense archaeological examination demanded by many deconstructionist and postmodern scholars.