

A Contribution to the Critique of Moral Reason

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The call for the application of the 'scientific method' to the investigation of human affairs is a call for a direct confrontation of that divorce between sense and sensibility which has been rightly diagnosed to be the malady of our time.
Clifford Geertz, *Thinking as a Moral Act*

Being critiqued in rigorous and generous terms – these can be exclusive options – is not such a frequent experience that it could be left without response. Carlo Caduff's carefully crafted argument about my article "Beyond Good and Evil?" has therefore exposed him to my rejoinder.

Before embarking on the matter of the exchange, I would like to briefly put my original paper in context, since this will shed light on my defense and illustration of moral anthropology. I have been conducting research during the past two decades on a series of topics, which I initially thought as part of medical anthropology and later inscribed in political anthropology, but which, as I realized afterward, all involved moral issues that could not easily find a space to be interpreted and debated in the field of anthropology: maternal deaths in the Ecuadorian Andes, AIDS orphanhood in South Africa, the condition of victims of disasters in Venezuela and of conflicts in Palestine, financial assistance to the poor and psychological care of the excluded in France, policies of immigration and asylum, the politics of humanitarianism, suffering and trauma. Such themes were saturated with moral categories and judgments, ethical problems and debates, but rarely analyzed as such. Like Monsieur Jourdain with prose, I progressively understood that I had been speaking of morals for twenty years without really being aware of it – or seriously acknowledging it. In other words, I never explicitly decided to study moral facts, as did Durkheim, but rather, as in the case of Weber for

capitalism, I encountered morality and ethics while working on problems mostly dealt with from a different perspective – that of domination.

This little epiphany concerned my comprehending three things: that there was a substantial moral and ethical dimension to these various questions; that it would be self-deceiving to deny my own moral and ethical implication in choosing to study them; and that there was something puzzling in the lack of collective reflection about these two points within the discipline. Writing the article published in *Anthropological Theory*, on Jonathan Friedman’s suggestion, was an attempt to address these three modest revelations. But I should also add that this questioning emerged in the more specific context of French social sciences, particularly impervious to moral interrogations and ethical questioning, which were generally suspected of normalizing intentions and of North American influence. The discussion engaged with Wiktor Stoczkowski had thus this backdrop of defiance toward any reference to morality and ethics.

As it often happens in such circumstances, when I started to re-problematize my previous research and current work around these issues, I discovered that I was obviously not alone in doing so. Not only have there been, from K.E. Read (1955) to John Ladd (1957), early efforts to present systematic ethnographies of local moralities, and from Abraham Edel (1962) to D.F. Pocock (1986), recurrent calls for the development of more explicit anthropological approaches of ethics, but the past decade has produced a flourishing of studies and even the emergence of a subfield. My paper on the “anthropological discomfort with morals” was thus written in a time which resembled more the beginning of a renaissance than the dark ages for the anthropology of moralities or, as I prefer to designate it, moral anthropology. What was still an embryonic bud five years ago, with pioneer works from Steven Parish (1994), Signe Howell (1997), James Laidlaw (2002), Joel Robbins (2004) and various others evoked in Jarrett Zigon’s earlier response (2010) to my paper, has given rise to the bloom of a hundred flowers, as one used to say – *o tempora! o mores!* –, with articles, books, special issues of journals, panels in conferences, seminars on both sides of the Atlantic – all references I will not cite here, but part of which can be found in recent review essays such as Jarrett Zigon’s (2008), individual

monographs such as Roger Douglas' (2009) and Jason Throop's (2010), or edited volumes such as Karen Sykes' (2009), Monica Heinz' (2009) and Michael Lambek's (2010), to cite only a few. My reply is therefore inscribed in this rapidly changing landscape, which obliges me, in relation to it, to define more precisely my initial – and at that time still burgeoning – intention.

Critical analysis

The discussion engaged by Carlo Caduff is indeed helpful in this respect. His argument is as follows. He accepts my premises that, on the one hand, there is a need for a study of moral issues at a collective level and of moral work at an individual level in contemporary societies, and that, on the other hand, this enterprise must include a reflexive attention to the moral stance of the researcher and, more broadly, of the discipline. He rephrases these two dimensions as “anthropology of ethics”, in James Faubion's terms (2011), and “ethics of anthropology”, as defended by Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban (2003), respectively. He takes up my attempt to avoid, on these two fronts, the symmetrical drifts of “moral positioning”, which consists in adopting the posture of a moral entrepreneur in the name of universalism, that is, in assuming the superiority of one's values, and of “cultural relativism”, or better said of its moral expression, in other words, the equivalence of all values. This is certainly a fine line, to which I have referred as “critical analysis”. But my punctilious critic is correct in observing, with regards to this qualification, that I do “not elaborate it further” and that my “account is somewhat vague” – at least in this paper. In effect, critical analysis is a method I have mostly put to work empirically (in particular in Fassin 2007, Fassin and Pandolfi 2010, Fassin and Rechtman 2009) and somewhat theorized more recently (for instance in Fassin 2011). But it is certainly worth being made more explicit. In so doing, I will refer to a body of texts I share with Carlo Caduff, most notably Michel Foucault, but, unlike him, my endeavor to discuss critique will take two complementary directions: first, I will relate it with current debates within the social sciences; second, I will apply it to empirical objects. These two lines of inquiry

will establish how my program of a moral anthropology is definitely distinct from his anthropology of ethics, although not in opposition to it.

The French language has one word – “critique” – while in English there are two – “critique” and “criticism” – a duality which underlines the confusion pointed out by Raymond Williams (1976), who chooses the latter as his “keyword” to rehabilitate it in the sense of the former, that is, freed from judgment. Since Kant, and perhaps even more since Foucault’s reading of him (2003: 48 and 53), critique has been associated with modernity, defined not “as an epoch”, but “as an attitude”, in other words, as “a mode of relating to contemporary reality” with the “critical question” which can be formulated in these terms: “In what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent and the product of arbitrary constraints?” If we take this question seriously and if we apply it to moralities and ethics, it becomes: in what we consider as moral or ethical, which seems to us not only as universal and necessary, but as obvious, beyond questioning, what is the product of history? This is the interrogation – or the exact symmetric one, asking what we view as unconditionally immoral – that was addressed in a collective work on “the constructions of the intolerable” (Fassin and Bourdelais 2005): how are the intolerable – slavery, torture, racial discrimination, child labor, sexual abuse, genital mutilation, suicide bombing, violence against civilians, etc. – and the corresponding categories of victims historically produced? To pose this question does not imply being morally relativistic in the common sense – suggesting that all values are equal – but in a sociological sense – reminding that the supposed eternal and shared values are both construed and debated. From this perspective, morality and ethics are not a given, but the result of the action of men and women to defend certain values against others. More than the peaceful realm imagined by ethicists, the moral and ethical domain is a battlefield, as disputes about abortion, death penalty, veil wearing or genocide labeling, among many others, have demonstrated during the past decades.

But how to fairly account for these disputes? In his work on social criticism and political commitment, Michael Walzer (2002) uses Plato’s allegory of the cave to differentiate two possible stances in relation to one’s object of research and

reflection. On the one hand, a long tradition of critics have placed themselves outside the cave, in the light of the sun, where the illusions of men and women living in the dark can be recognized for what they are and from where truth may eventually be revealed to the ignorant crowd. On the other hand, a more recent approach consists in sharing the condition of men and women inside of the cave, considering that there is no absolute or exterior truth to be discovered but that social meaning is coproduced by social agents. The former typically corresponds to the Marxist legacy, whereas the latter generally refers to the pragmatist theory. This dualism has indeed divided the French social sciences over recent decades, with the confrontation between Pierre Bourdieu's critical sociology and Luc Boltanski's sociology of criticism, sometimes described as the opposition between, respectively, the paradigms of unveiling and translating (Bénatouïl 1999): according to the first one, the logics and mechanisms of domination have to be unveiled because they are concealed by the dominant and ignored by the dominated; in line with the second one, the role of the researcher is to merely translate into a formal grammar the justification and action provided by the social agents themselves.

Rather than having to choose between the two, between light and darkness, I propose to situate the critic on the threshold of the cave, not in an undecided in-between position, but in one from where it is possible to go inside and outside, alternatively. The anthropologist acknowledges holding most of its understanding of society from the people he works with or amidst and must account for the way they make sense of the world they live in, more precisely the moral categories and judgments they use, and the ethics they mobilize to confront problems or dilemmas. But he also knows that he must maintain a distance from their interpretations and justifications to shed light on facts and processes which may not be visible to or are rendered invisible by the actors, such as the hidden reasons that motivate their choice of certain norms, the interests they have in defending certain values, and the unanticipated consequences of the sentiments that drive them. This is what I have attempted to do, for instance, in my research on the humanitarian politics of life: on the one hand, I was attentive to the moral arguments humanitarian workers provided to explain their intervention, to the inevitable ethical debates and

contradictions resulting from it; on the other hand, I was analyzing the moral and ethical blind spots of their activity, their untold logics, their unexpected effects, and the ontological inequalities it created or reinforced.

This borderline position is a distinctive feature of social sciences, especially when it is grounded in ethnography. Unlike the abstract perspective of moral philosophy and the experimental approach of cognitive science, the method of anthropology and sociology is based on empirical material, which resists formal reductionism. Contrary to philosophers or neuroscientists, anthropologists and sociologists deal with real people in concrete situations, in which, like gems are inseparable from their gangue, morality and ethics are inextricably mixed with the political and the social. Fieldwork incessantly reminds social scientists that they are exploring frontiers. Linking ethics as an object of inquiry and ethics as a practice involving the subjects of the investigation, the position on the threshold of the cave I suggest as an epistemological stance for critical thinking therefore represents the point of articulation between the anthropology of ethics and the ethics of anthropology, for which Carlo Caduff advocates.

Moral Economies

As one possible – although not exclusive – way to deploy this critical method, I have proposed the concept of “moral economy” (Fassin 2009). It is well known that, although the expression has a longer history, it was coined in the social sciences by E.P. Thompson who introduced it in his monograph on the English working class (1968) and analyzed it with more refinement in his reassessment of the signification of so-called food riots (1971) and his revisiting of the concept twenty years later (1991). Opposing the traditional political economy of both proletariat and peasantry, he wanted to underline the existence of an economy distinct from that of the triumphant market, and based on norms and obligations, practices of solidarity and expectations of justice, which were prevalent among the dominated. The concept, initially limited to the interpretation of violent protests against oppression or exploitation, was later extended, via James Scott’s work in

particular (1976), to more insidious forms of resistance, and eventually reinvented, without reference to its original proponent, most notably by Lorraine Daston (1995), as a network of values and affects underlying scientific ethos. The former was quite influential among political anthropologists studying social movements (Edelman 2005), the latter within medical anthropology involved in the analysis of scientific practices (Lock 2001). Reappraising these diverse uses of the concept, and adapting the classical definition of political economy (Say 1972 [1803]), I suggest comprehending moral economies as the production, circulation, distribution and use of norms and obligations, values and affects.

Understood this way, the concept of moral economies avoids the pitfall rightly evoked by Carlo Caduff and not clarified enough in my paper under discussion, which consists in considering “local systems of moral values within specific societies” as clearly bounded entities, with the effect of having “moral anthropology gradually turn into a conventional form of cultural anthropology”. Actually, the risk is even to reproduce a surreptitious form of culturalism, a difficulty the ethnographies of moralities face indeed: what they tend to provide is a fine description of local worlds neatly circumscribed by the boundaries of ethnic or national or more generally cultural groups. On the contrary, moral economies allow dynamic and fluid approaches in terms of scale and space, therefore linking the microsocial and the macrosocial, on the one hand, and articulating the local and the global, on the other hand. They are not cultures or subcultures under another name. They underline the permanent work of adopting, redefining, and contesting norms and values. They analyze the dissemination, appropriation and transformation of sensibilities and sentiments. An illustration will make this point clearer.

The category of trauma was invented at the end of the nineteenth century to describe initially the physical and later the psychic consequences of train accidents and shell shocks (Young 1995). During the First World War, the clinical condition described as “war neurosis”, a vague entity designating the psychological suffering of soldiers who had been exposed to the dreadful experience of trenches, was considered to be a form of hysteria, at best, or simulation, at worst, depending on the psychiatrists’ belief that the secondary benefits of not being sent back to the

front line were unconscious or conscious. In that epoch, traumatized soldiers were suspect. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the American Psychiatric Association recognized a new clinical identity under the appellation of “posttraumatic stress disorder” via the DSM-III, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. The symptoms presented by war veterans as well as victims of sexual abuse or disaster victims did not differ from those described about the military in previous conflicts, but rather than being regarded with distrust as had been the case in the past, they created rights to medical care and financial reparations. In fact, they became the psychic signature of a new status: that of victim.

This requalification included not only those who had been submitted to abuses, but also witnesses and even perpetrators. The three players in the scenario of violence were reunited beyond their moral differences and even oppositions. Since they suffered from the same “intrusive recollection of the event”, “numbing of general responsiveness” and “increasing arousal”, as expressed in medical language, they were not only to be psychologically treated the same way, but equally viewed as victims of the violence to which they had been associated. Thus in only a few decades, the moral economy of trauma shifted from suspicion to recognition regarding the condition of victimhood. Once illegitimate, the victim had become legitimate – in fact, one of the most legitimate figures of our time. Apprehending this change corresponds exactly to what Michel Foucault considered to be the heart of critique: going beyond the obviousness of what constitutes the present. Whereas psychological expertise and common sense tend to construe trauma as taken for granted to the point that it becomes naturalized – sometimes even in the literal sense of a material inscription in the brain – critical analysis de-naturalizes it and re-historicizes it. But is this sufficient? My answer is that it is a decisive first step, yet not the ultimate stage of critique – at least for the social sciences.

The reconfiguration of a moral economy – in this case the legitimization of victims – produces social effects which must be investigated. Here, empirical inquiry becomes indispensable. What is gained and what is lost in this process of moral change? And what is at stake in these gains and losses? These are the interrogations one should attempt to respond to through ethnographic work. This is what I have

done in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the Second Intifada (Fassin 2008). Moral economies, as suggested by the definition, are about the production but also the dissemination and consumption of sensibilities. In this process, moral issues are transformed and ethical questions are reformulated. What was significant and relevant for the Vietnam veteran may not be for the Palestinian stone thrower under the tanks' fire or for the Israeli witness of a suicide bombing. The global expansion of trauma as a medical category and as a powerful metaphor has give rise to local appropriations. In the Middle East, humanitarian workers from Doctors Without Borders and Doctors of the World, as well as local organizations in Palestine and Israel, have used trauma and its symptoms as a way to attest to the world about the suffering of victims of the war. From a clinical entity allowing certain individual benefits, it has been turned into a narrative matter serving as a testimony to the international community.

But this cultural translation is also a political one. By representing the adolescent as a victim of trauma rather than oppression – although the two are not mutually exclusive, of course – humanitarian organizations, both global and local, produce a significant moral inflection, from indignation to compassion, from ethos to pathos. Certainly, one should not exaggerate the opposition between the two registers, but it is clear that the image of the stone thrower, local hero jeopardizing his life to defend his nation during the day, changed into a vulnerable child suffering from enuresis at night, is far from being insignificant or innocent. What is gained in terms of “humanization” of the cause – via the transformation of militants viewed as potential terrorists into traumatized youth arousing sympathy – is simultaneously a loss from an ethical perspective: in terms of voice, because of the substitution of an international word for the word of the local protagonists; in terms of meaning, because of the disappearance of the biographical and historical context behind the psychic symptoms. This was obvious in particular when, paralleling the respective trauma of Palestinians submitted to the repression of the Israeli army and Israelis witnessing Palestinian attacks on television, one humanitarian organization established an equivalence of victims on the basis of the equivalence of their suffering, thus abolishing any possible political distinction. Indeed, humanitarian

workers themselves are not entirely unaware of the consequences of the reconfiguration of the moral economy of violence and sometimes become involved in ethical discussions and contentions.

In evoking this case study, my intention is to underline how moral issues are profoundly entangled within larger social, historical and political issues which are often missed by the anthropology of ethics as Carlo Caduff proposes it, following the philosophical approach of virtue. The constitution of the self as an ethical subject does occur within a specific situation, as he rightly phrases it, but the tradition of virtue ethics, which has recently opened interesting new horizons for anthropologists, is more insistent on the practices which constitute the self than on the politics that defines the situation. Reintroducing politics in relation to ethics is a major reason for my promoting the concept of moral economy.

Conclusion

The fast growing domain that I suggest calling moral anthropology – just as one speaks of medical anthropology or political anthropology, although I am not especially attached to any particular designation – has taken two main directions. One of them explores the Durkheimian trail (Karsenti 2012). It has been mostly thought in terms of local moralities, that is, via the description and analysis of norms and values composing an explicit or implicit code to which social agents refer when they think or act. This code can be more or less constraining and more or less embodied. The other orientation follows Foucault's steps (Faubion 2012). It has often been considered in terms of ethical subjectivities, as opposed to moral determinism, even in societies supposedly ruled by strong systems of imposition and obligation. Whether they are viewed as moral reasoning or ordinary ethics, whether they concern care or piety, the practices thus described reflect the capacity of individuals to formulate and enact morality and ethics in their everyday life. I have referred to Durkheim and Foucault as totems of these two approaches, but I could have provided a deeper philosophical lineage, going back respectively to Kant and Aristotle. However efficient this dialectic of reproduction and freedom (Robbins

2007) has been in recent years to circumscribe the field of morality and ethics in anthropology and, up to a certain point, social sciences, it does not exhaust the critical space I am attempting to delineate.

Actually, more than the space as such, it is its frontiers which I find promising to explore. I have suggested two aspects of this exploration, which define what I regard as critical thinking. The first frontier corresponds to what can be metaphorically described as the threshold of the cave: it is the strength of ethnographers to move back and forth from their object to their subjects, from the distant perspective to the intimate inquiry; they cannot deny the intelligence social agents develop about the social world, but they cannot elude their responsibility as autonomous thinkers; this double bind renders the social critique distinct from the philosophical one. The second frontier refers to the delimitation of morality and ethics: to the vision of morality and ethics as objects of reasoning and practice which can be isolated from other dimensions of human life, anthropologists oppose the representation of an impure domain of debates and disputes; they apprehend moral and ethical issues in their network of meaning, within their historical context and in their intricate relation with politics; again, this empirical blurring of boundaries differentiates the involvement of the social sciences as opposed to the detachment of philosophical thinking.

In the conclusion of his paper, Carlo Caduff adopts and develops the idea expressed in the last sentence of my article to “consider our moral discomfort with morals as heuristic”. He felicitously refers to Foucault’s intellectual plea in favor of systematic doubt and uncertainty. The inflection towards ethics, at the end of the French philosopher’s life, is however not exempt of a certain ambiguity, which his followers may have minimized: it oscillates between the government of the self and the government of others, often privileging the former over the latter or merely deriving the second from the first. Extrapolating from Locke’s reflections on the determination of action by disquiet, my proposition would therefore be to complement the ethics of discomfort with a politics of uneasiness.

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Abstract

Responding to Carlo Caduff's comments on an earlier paper of mine provides me the opportunity to refine my defense and illustration of moral anthropology. After having recalled that my personal encounter with moralities and ethics was of the kind of Monsieur Jourdain's discovery of prose, rather than a deliberate effort to apply moral philosophy to social science, I attempt to clarify my positioning in terms of critical thinking and my reformulation of the concept of moral economies, using my research on the intolerable and on humanitarianism. My explicit intention is to go beyond or rather, more modestly, to veer away from the alternative between the Durkheim-Kant legacy and the Foucault-Aristotle tradition, and from the dialectic between morality as code and ethics as freedom. It is to explore two epistemological frontiers: one related to the place occupied by the anthropologist, which I suggest should be on the threshold of rather than inside or outside Plato's cave; the other one linked to the separation of a moral and ethical matter from the social gangue of human lives, which I find problematic because of the loss of history and

politics it implies. I contend that both frontiers engage what it means and implies to be doing social science in the contemporary world.