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Authenticity, Anthropology and the Sacred

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"Authenticity, Anthropology and the Sacred."

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My charge for this paper was completely open-ended. I was told I could "write about anything I liked, as much as I wanted, in any format I pleased". While liberating, this unaccustomed freedom also caused me considerable anxiety. I am used to following a certain rhetorical structure: writing a set number of pages on a particular topic in a preordained style. In a very minor way, the nervousness generated by the openness of my mandate for this article resembled what occurs anytime the bases for action are problematic, ambiguous, or absent entirely, and where limits are unknown.

As many social theorists have argued, the disoriented and anxious state caused by lack of boundaries and absence of rules is commonplace today, and is a consequence of the rupture with the past associated with the triumph of capitalism. ⁱ The authoritative worldviews that existed previously were the products of a process of sacralization that provided human beings with the legitimization of their daily orientation to action. This sacralization of a meaning system was, as Weber says, first aroused by a creative act of charismatic connection which stimulated an immediate, magical sense of transcendence and participation; primary charisma was then rationalized and channeled into sacred objects. As time passed, and the immediate compulsion of the original irrational charismatic annunciation

receded, followers maintained their spiritual connection by worship of those items imbued with the charismatic aura. ⁱⁱ According to secularization theory, it is this connection that has been lost in modern life.

In contrast, in Medieval Europe, a living bond with the sacred past was achieved through many means, including *furta sacra*, which was the "sacred theft" of holy relics from ruined, neglected or provincial shrines. According to historians, there was intense competition for possession of saintly body parts and other such objects, since the sanctity (and popularity) of churches rested in large measure on the number and quality of the relics displayed within them. To meet the demand, professional traffickers in holiness travelled around medieval Europe, snatching and then selling splinters of the cross and bits and pieces of various saints to anyone with funds to buy. Some priests also sought relics themselves. Bishop Hugh of Lincoln (later canonized) was one of the most assiduous practitioners of *furta sacra*. Allowed to handle the arm of Mary Magdalene at a rival shrine, he surreptitiously bit off a finger and took it back to his parish, where it remains today. ⁱⁱⁱ

Bishop Hugh, with his good teeth and opportunistic gnawing at the sacred, was a precursor of our modern museum curators, who also seek out and acquire, usually by less macabre means, the artworks that serve as contemporary equivalents of the sacred, though instead of the bones of the saint they present for veneration the personal creations of the artist. Like Medieval priests, curators are also concerned to demonstrate

that the objects they have accumulated are originals, not forgeries, and therefore truly worthy of devotion.

The issue of authentication foregrounds differences between medieval and modern consciousness. Even though Mary Magdalene seems to have had as many arms as Kali, and although only a sequoia could have produced all the existent fragments of the true cross, among Medieval believers an undeniable verification of relics was possible through the offices of the Holy See, which carefully checked records of the history of the object and of the miracles associated with it in order to provide incontrovertible official validation. Warring claims could be settled by Papal intervention as well. Thus the body of the Irish St. Abbanus, was deemed to exist both in the monastery where he began preaching and in the one where he died. ^{iv} In other controversial cases, vendors selling suspect objects and body parts could be subjected to official ordeals, such as submersion in boiling water, to test their veracity.

No doubt modern museum curators envy their Medieval counterparts their methods for certification, since their own attempts to authenticate the authorship of the artistic productions they have collected are psychologically much less satisfying, and are far more liable to controversy. The expert opinions of art historians and connoisseurs are remarkably diverse, and certainly no substitute for divine authority; nor is scientific evidence, no matter how impressive, unimpeachable, since such evidence can only establish probability and can never provide a final proof of the true origin of a work of art.

Historical records too are notoriously unreliable. As a result of all these problems, artworks long held to be genuine have been impugned as forgeries by some, while ardently defended as "the real thing" by others. Nonetheless, the creativity of great artists is still revered - even if it is no longer certain what art they actually produced! v

Like our curatorial cousins and priestly ancestors, anthropologists too have long been inveterate gnawers at the sacred, searching the world for authentic charismatic objects worthy of public display and admiration. But while the art museums valorized the creativity of individuals and where sacred bones were the remnants of named saints, until recently anthropologists have been primarily preoccupied with the communal productions of distant and alien cultures. As is well known, the disciplinary fascination with exotic and primitive collectives was inspired by the legacy of the romantic historian and philosopher Johann Gotfried Herder (1744-1803), who had argued that such societies constituted organic entities each animated by its own distinctive "genius". According to Herder, the material production of every such "folk" culture could be appreciated as a reflection of its organic unity and authentic essence.

It followed that isolated groups unsullied by the contaminating influences of cultural pluralism were more pure in their aesthetic production and, by implication, in their spiritual life. By this logic, the ancient Greeks were unsullied until they conquered Asia Minor; the Romans before the

Empire were more authentic and integrated than they were afterwards; uncivilized tribesmen were, in every case, more authentic than civilized urbanites. In short, as Edward Sapir put it, a deep gulf divided culture which was "genuine" (such as that of precontact American Indians) from culture which was "spurious" (such as our own). vi

For anthropologists in this romantic tradition, the material products of an aboriginal culture and, more abstractly, the symbolic worldview they represented, were the equivalents of the finger of Mary Magdalene or an original Rembrandt - charismatic entities providing an immediate connection with the sacred. In fact, in a very real sense, the anthropologist was more personally implicated in the quest for the transcendent than the curator who collected art or even than the priest who acquired holy relics, since the objects and views sought by anthropologists came from living people. This meant that during fieldwork the anthropologist could hope not merely to touch the sacred second hand, but could penetrate directly into it. In other words, while the cleric and the curator had to be content with achieving second-hand grace through proximity to an object with a charismatic pedigree, the anthropologist had the chance to commune with the thing itself.

At the same time, the ethnographer, born on the other side of the psychological and temporal rupture associated with modernity, was also necessarily self-consciously aware of the contingent aspect of all social realities and knew that cultures are continuously created by human beings, not given by the Gods

or the ancestors. Furthermore, romantic nostalgia was necessarily undercut by the everydayness of life, even in the most exotic locale. As a result, the romantic ethnographer was torn by contradiction, wresting sacred relics from the depths of the primitive for fragmented moderns to marvel at, but unable to fully believe in the transcendent qualities of the world they came from.

Of course, this greatly simplified picture of the predicament of the romantic ethnographer ignores the pragmatism of more positivistically inclined anthropologists who sought legitimacy through emulating the methods of our modern-day white-robed scientific priesthood. But I think most of my readers will recognize in themselves at least some traces of the romantic quest for authenticity in their own spiritual trajectories within the discipline. They will probably also recognize that there are many sins and failings associated with the romantic anthropological quest to experience the "truth" of exotic peoples. The most serious of these is that the search for a genuine culture has encouraged a reification of the "primitive" as a monolithic entity, an essentializing of others, and a foolish refusal to accept the actual mobility and fluidity of the social world. This set of attitudes has in turn offered encouragement to nationalist and ethnic primordialists, who have used anthropological and archeological evidence to promote their own version of an "us" versus "them" mentality, complete with purges and ethnic cleansing, violently inverting the romantic quest to reveal and appreciate the beauty of other cultures.

In response to the unforeseen misuse of romantic ethnography by racists and nationalists, and in light of the all too obvious displacement of peoples in the contemporary world, many anthropologists have repudiated their disciplinary history of divine theft and have valorized instead the plural realities, flowing populations, and proliferating lifestyles characteristic of late capitalism. All of these, they say, invalidate any assertion of authenticity. Such claims are now taken as the cardinal sin in the anthropological canon: the false attribution of an essence, equivalent to racism.

As a result, scavenging for the vestiges of a vanishing authenticity has now generally been replaced by the anthropologist's assumption of a more lofty position, floating above local claims for transcendence or truth, demonstrating again and again that these claims actually are political and ideological representations supplied by self-interested parties pursuing domination. In this disenchanting picture of culture as a delusion, it is assumed that the struggle for power prevails over every other motivation. Any claim to authenticity is assumed to be at best a "misrecognition" of what is in reality an unwarranted assertion of hegemony. Culture is no longer the seat of a transcendent sacred order, but is contested, construed and contradictory; a never-ending battleground for superiority among competitors who use the notion of the holy as a ploy.

To combat the tactics of ideological reification, the anthropologist may claim that any and all claims to cultural authority are coercive, constraining and therefore destructive

of human freedom, understood in its simplest negative sense as an absence of compulsion. The presumption is that a nonjudgmental awareness of and acceptance of a formless, multiplying, intersecting plurality of shifting perspectives is of absolute value, precisely because the deceptive charismatic "wholeness" of culture is denied. In principle, those who realize this truth should then be free of the prison of culturally constrained beliefs, content to experience the "play of tropes" with a kind of detached aesthetic pleasure. To perhaps unduly extend my comparative argument, this is like a curator mounting a show where critical commentary has taken the place of the paintings.

What's left? Certainly the many who are afraid of challenges to their most cherished beliefs and who clutch at the shreds of a coherent identity will continue to shield their eyes from the challenge of multiplicity and contingency, and keep focused on the straight and narrow of traditional faith, telling themselves that they indeed have access to the sacred word. But this option now involves a willful ignorance and an uncomfortable denial of the ambiguity of a heterogeneous present. Save for those isolated few who can somehow maintain their innocence, the result can be a life of hypocrisy, absurdity and self-delusion. The stain of maintaining a crumbling foundation can also result in defensive fanaticism and xenophobia, punishing others for the doubts that are felt deep within. vii

There is a third alternative to either self-deceptive bigotry or the bland embrace of formlessness. This is reorienting the quest for the authentic inward, toward the subjectivity of the seeker - an approach now expressed in anthropology as phenomenology or the anthropology of the senses, and popularly found in the widespread New Age religions. The pervasive assumption is that it is within our deepest selves that we will find the ultimate truth previously embodied in saints or in the God-like creativity of the artist. Philosophically, the foundational Western work validating the inward journey is Martin Heidegger's Being and Time. In it, Heidegger concluded that an authentic sense of Being could appear only through a rigorous and self-sufficient existence "wrenched away from the 'they'" - that is, the world of the ordinary and everyday. ^{viii} When listening to the chatter of the 'they', Heidegger says, we are slaves to popular opinion and so unable to discover who we really are. What is required instead is an austere and solitary realization of one's own temporality and fatality - achieving a "freedom-towards-death" that can be fulfilled through death itself. Thus, Heidegger makes the authentic self sacred, but only via a continuous awareness of its own lonely and final obliteration. ^{ix}

In the fluid world of modernity, where standards are shifting and lack a sacred basis, where civilization itself is castigated as coercive and provisional, it is vastly appealing to believe that one's own interior life (and death) is the ultimate and irrefutable source of meaning and authenticity.

Heidegger's philosophy carries this tendency to its ultimate conclusions, and reveals very clearly its implications: it is mystical, asocial, ahistorical, heroic, individualistic, and morbid. This philosophy, while suited to modern conditions, can have no lasting resonance with anthropologists, because it denies the fundamental premises about social life and culture that our discipline is founded upon.

So far, very quickly and very schematically, I've conjured up and summarily dismissed some reactions to the crisis of faith implicit in the experience of modernity. At the same time, I have accepted that anthropologists, more than others perhaps, have learned firsthand about the reality of contingency, pluralism, and the continuous human effort that goes into manufacturing and maintaining any sense of cultural coherence. Painful experience has also taught us how claims to authenticity can be used to oppress and destroy. As a result, even our traditional role as conservators of the relics of lost wholeness has been made problematic; yet modern substitutes for cultural faith offer little solace - only solipsism, self-delusion, or lofty contemplation of a world empty of significance.

My comparison of anthropologists with priests and curators was meant to suggest that our discipline has particular responsibilities in this situation: we have a public duty not only to document the rationalization and disenchantment of the world, but also to remember and honor our own roots as seekers and purveyors of the relics of lost divinity. We know too that the human desire for the experience of the divine spark does not

vanish simply because that experience becomes difficult to achieve. Instead, it is more likely that the quest for a felt authentic grounding becomes increasingly pressing as certainty is eroded and the boundaries of the real lose their taken-for-granted validity.

The search for a sense of authenticity is the most salient and pervasive consequence of the threats modernity makes to our ordinary reality and sense of significance. We know that, within historical and cultural constraints, lifeworlds today must self-consciously be "made up" to provide some shape and meaning within the limitless potentials of a contingent universe. Like medieval monks, we all now must look for something sacred to hold on to, but without the possibility of gaining any exterior authentication; there is no certification of the really real anymore, and anything can be a forgery.

Yet, the challenges of modernity also offer avenues for creation of a different kind of authentic reality. For example, the impossibility of absolutely validating the origin of artworks or saintly relics has not meant they have lost their fascination or power - rather, modern artists appropriate icons from the past and forge them into new works by imitation, parody, bricolage and pastiche. As Daniel Miller has brilliantly argued, contemporary culture too is forged in this double sense - "Authenticity is created out of fakery" - manufactured by self-aware actors seriously playing with the possibilities of achieving meaning in a contingent and open field of symbols, objects, and experiences. "It is because culture is knowingly

forged with a sense of struggle and fragility, a sense that it could be otherwise and a constant fear that it is otherwise, that makes it a modern culture".^x The main job of anthropologists today, following our own long tradition as self-conscious practitioners of *furta sacra*, is to record, contextualize and analyze the many manifestations and vicissitudes of this transformative process. The sacred is where you find it.

2956 words

ENDNOTES:

i For this definition of modernity, see chapter one in J. Habermas The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity Cambridge: MIT Press 1987.

ii For a survey of the literature and an expansion of my position, see C. Lindholm Charisma Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1990.

iii Cited in P. Binski Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation London: British Museum Press 1996: 15. It is not clear whether, after his canonization, St. Hugh's corpse became in turn a new source of miraculous relics.

iv J.P. Geary "Furta Sacra" Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages Princeton, Princeton University Press 1990: 116.

v The above section is based on D. Phillips Exhibiting Authenticity Manchester, Manchester University Press 1997.

vi See E. Sapir "Culture, Genuine and Spurious". In D. Mandelbaum (ed) Selected Writings of Edward Sapir on Language, Culture and Personality Berkeley: University of California Press 1949. (original publication 1924).

vii This psychological mechanism was most brilliantly described by D. Hume The Natural History of Religion Stanford: Stanford University Press 1956 (original publication 1757).

viii M. Heidegger Being and Time New York: Harper 1962: 307.

ix Theodor Adorno says Heidegger's argument is "an exegesis of the futile joke: Only death is free and that costs your life" (The Jargon of Authenticity Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1973: 152).

x D. Miller Modernity: An Ethnographic Approach Oxford: Berg 1994: 321-2.