

New Release Book Review

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Paul Rabinow, *The Accompaniment: Assembling the Contemporary*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 248 pp.

I.

Anthropology is awash in novelty. New digital networks propagate and expand new political possibilities; synthetic biology creates new life-forms; new reproductive technologies require new legal recognitions of relationality; transnational connections produce new opportunities for engagements and encounters beyond boundaries. Emergence and possibility are the very DNA of contemporary thinking. Meanwhile, of course, innovation in the methods of anthropology—from multi-sited fieldwork to new forms of collaboration and communication through social networks—is valued and celebrated precisely in order to capture and understand new ethnographic objects and contexts, and to form a new anthropology.

Paul Rabinow has been one of the most consistent chroniclers of biotechnical novelties and, reflexively, of the anthropological response to what he calls “the contemporary.” He has produced pairs of books at regular intervals over the past 15 years, one book reporting on his engagements with the life sciences and then another reflecting on these engagements as a means to develop conceptual equipment adequate to this space of unexampled novelty. The “reflection” part of the latest entry in this intermittent series appears before the research report. The latter, co-authored with Gaymon Bennett, comes out of their joint work as co-Principal Investigator and Director of ethical oversight, respectively, within a new institution for synthetic biology at Berkeley. They have chosen to call their “thrust” of the NSF-funded center “Human Practices” and the book, to be released later this year, is called *Designing Human Practices*. Alongside that book is the aptly named *The Accompaniment: Assembling the Contemporary*, a heterogeneous set of essays that together respond

to the challenge of remaking—remediating or reconstructing—the intellectual vocation as it is confronted by institutional and scientific novelties.

In addition to providing his reflections on the research in synthetic biology and parallel efforts he has made to reshape graduate teaching in anthropology, these essays together constitute an account of Rabinow's own long period of fieldwork in anthropology—his participation in universities, research teams, and philosophical pedagogy, and his various attempts to experiment with anthropological writing. What does it mean to “think” today, Rabinow asks, and how can we construct practices within universities that will foster thinking about contemporary problems? More crucially, what intellectual practices are most conducive to finding “companions” and “contemporaries”—inviting others to accompany us in responding to the issues of the day?

Rabinow's technique of report and reflection in paired volumes, of course, was set with his first two books, an ethnographic monograph and the recently-reissued *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (2007). Then, the problem was less the novelty of objects of knowledge than the status of tradition and of “culture” as guides to understanding people's action and its forms, under the changeful sign of “modernization.” “Tradition,” he wrote in 1975, in a phrase he has quoted in his recent attempts to define the contemporary as a space of anthropological research, is a “moving image of the past, opposed not to modernity but to alienation” (2008:2). If the life sciences are, as ethical thinkers fear, the new space of alienation for and from humanity, then this is not, Rabinow tells us, something we can measure against any fixed background or measuring stick of “the human” or “the social” or even “the modern.” Rather this is a “moving ratio” that forms a problem-space for reflection, through engagement with the practices that constitute this space of novelties.

This engagement in a mobile “problem-space,” however, presents some perennial challenges for Rabinow the anthropologist, such as institutional barriers to cooperation, blocked forms of collaboration, personal affinities, and potent misunderstandings. In such impasses, as he encountered them in different portions of his career, Rabinow finds his subject for *The Accompaniment*, a book presided over by a spirit of agnosticism and irresolution.

II.

The first half of *The Accompaniment* presents contrasted pairs of essays, two each on Clifford Geertz and Michel Foucault. These two figures, both of whom made in different ways a personal contribution to Rabinow's intellectual formation, are framed in the introduction as having lived out highly contrasting ways of thinking and teaching. Geertz is *writerly*, an *author*, and—a term that will anchor the master contrast that Rabinow works through here—seeks *redemption* in the intellectual vocation, cast as a retreat into the privacy of the text. By contrast, Foucault *lectures*, *talks*, and *speaks truth*. His quest is for *salvation*, a term that Rabinow draws from Foucault's very last lectures at the Collège de France, and by which he takes Foucault to mean a practice that will transform both the thinker and the world.

Rabinow has gone over the biographical details of his own relationship with Geertz several times recently. In *The Accompaniment*, he reprints an essay from a recent memorial volume for Geertz (edited by Susan Slyomovics) and an analytic essay first published in 1983, on relativism and interpretivism in anthropology. These essays are supplemented with further notes and reflections linking them to the second half of Rabinow's intellectual trajectory, his embrace of Foucault and pursuit of “fieldwork in philosophy.” Rabinow's intellectual debt to Foucault is too well-known to rehearse here, and is presented in a tone of grateful awe which does not entice. The essays on Geertz are more difficult and rewarding to think with, because they are more densely, and problematically, infused by the traces of unresolved experiences, and marked by the kind of “discordancy” that Rabinow continues to find productive in his blocked engagements with scientists (a later chapter is called “An Experiment in Discordancy”).

Rabinow's relations with Geertz as advisee and junior member of a research team in Morocco were chilly, fraught, and almost certainly Oedipal (on both sides—Geertz once referred to Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork* as “dispiriting” [1988:92]). In the memorial essay reprinted here, Rabinow chooses to speak truth rather than give obsequies. The truth, from his perspective, was of an “awkward human being who learned to use that awkwardness to his own continuing advantage” (48), and who retreated into irrelevant belle-lettrism as soon as the opportunity availed at the Institute for Advanced Study. These reflections are, indeed, dispiriting—not because they are *ad hominem*, but because the privilege of experimentation that

Rabinow otherwise celebrates here is denied any presence in Geertz's intellectual practice, or his questioning prose. Geertz emerges, moreover, as a very flat character, a buffo figure of authority; an effect that relies on Rabinow's own compositional talents, and his partial elision of the many others who must have peopled this stage of self-becoming (Hildred Geertz and Lawrence Rosen get passing mentions as other antagonists in the field). The very skillful crafting of this account makes Rabinow's swipes at Geertz's writerliness seem all the more out of tune.

The other essay, on relativism and interpretive anthropology, is nearly 30 years old, and the decision to reprint it here only makes sense in light of the other retrospective accounts of the period among which it is included. Otherwise, the essay seems not so much untimely as out-of-date. The essay pronounces on the "bracketing" of the "truth and seriousness" of other people's value-systems by anthropology, and the "nihilism" of the anthropological project that reduces all meaning to mere commentary upon experience. Rabinow complains of Geertz's interpretive anthropology that in it "Ethics, science, and truth all become aesthetic" (30).

When this essay was first published, in the shadow of Vietnam, at a time when the American intellectual could no longer imagine that "he" was set apart from the world of race and inequality, when rights were taking on new material expressions in particular bodies, it no doubt made some sense to reject interpretive anthropology as too even-handed in its treatment of differences, as "merely" aesthetic. But when all difference is grist for the mill of commodification, surely aesthetics, styles of living, and taking life seriously, are themselves part of the ethical terrain that we need to continue to explore, with interpretive tools that move us beyond stereotyped self-descriptions and wounded identities (our own included). In this context, the forms of textual interpretation and ostensibly apolitical play with other meanings that Geertz is specifically attacked for here, can come to look instead like an imaginative attempt to take quite seriously the incommensurability of other ways of experiencing life. The question for Geertz, indeed, was how we are entangled in real relationships of violence, care, or indeed disinterest, by the conflicting interpretations that other aesthetic forms—other ethical valuations of the good and the beautiful—can impel, especially as their meaning is slowly unfolded for us through intimacy and broadening of experience (Geertz 1983). The success of this anthropology does not depend on an individual's capacity to form empathetic bonds with other people—as Rabinow implies in the newer essay

here—but on the anthropologist’s willingness to receive the claims they, or their aesthetic productions, make upon one, and to interpret these in light of ongoing experience (Coleman 2009).

III.

Rabinow, indeed, is quite willing to distance himself, as a thinker, from the various interlocutors and venues he participates in as a researcher and professor here. For instance, he speaks quite freely of the scientists, of art critics whom he draws some ideas from, and others, as “simply not contemporaries” with him and his projects (106). The scientists are bound to communities of practice which limit their ability to trust others, especially an anthropological interloper. Likewise, in Rabinow’s critique in the essay on relativism Geertz and Boas both maintain their analytic distance from the living, breathing moral matters that they subject to relativizing scrutiny, and thus Rabinow distinguishes his own project from theirs. Elsewhere, Agamben and his followers are said to be too vested in serious recuperation of the eternal to ask what difference today makes with respect to yesterday, and therefore are not Rabinow’s contemporaries (209).

Rabinow’s research involvement with synthetic biology promised, at first, to involve him differently. “Rather unexpectedly,” he writes of his invitation to join the Synthetic Biology Engineering Research Center, or SynBERC, as a funded co-principal investigator “I found myself moving from my more habitual position as an anthropological observer to one in which I accepted the challenge of becoming an engaged participant” (158). But in this case, the scientists at SynBERC were uninterested in involving the Human Practices team in their actual work, and did not feel that they shared a project with them, apart from shared funding.

Rabinow finds himself “walking home from my office one day,” asking himself “should I trust these guys?” He moves from this point of doubt and uncertainty as to the sustainability of his research enterprise, due to its dependence on the goodwill and cooperation of others, to a theorization of the problem in terms of Niklas Luhmann’s work on trust. He comes out the other end of his examination of his problem of blocked participation newly committed to the value of anthropological participation in such projects, but on its own terms, and without any remaining expectation of further incorporation into the main research enterprise. “One has to trust that the [anthropological] practice is itself inherently worthwhile: that

conceptual invention and clarification, ascetic exercise of the will in pursuit of knowledge and insight...will yield dividends for one's soul, one's friends, and that small virtual cohort of future students and readers" (174). In this venue, because "downstream" ethical consultations and a kind of philosophical PR service are preferred by the scientists, collaboration on their terms can only mean sacrificing one's own commitments to truth and veridiction. Rabinow prefers, instead, to accept and indeed effect a systematic closure of any real collaboration touching upon the space of the research activities of the synthetic biologists.

This might appear, in light of Rabinow's essay on interpretivism, as a disreputable refusal of engagement in favor of analysis and commentary. In the essays on Foucault here, however, Rabinow very astutely makes problematic any simplistic opposition between the work of the thinker and the demand to be *engagé* in the Sartrean sense (4, 81). He argues, rather, that Foucault's practice and experimentation obliterates this contrast by making thought itself an ethical practice, and philosophy a site of experience (94). But what remains of his own demand, voiced 30 years ago, to take others' value-systems seriously as moral worlds that place claims upon the participant observer, not merely as objects of commentary? Especially when those moral worlds are so pervasive and powerful?

It is a shame that this recent effort at collaboration with scientists was so unavailing, though Rabinow is careful not to describe it as a failure. One cannot help but wonder how much of this is due to the very rigor of the project of concept-formation, problematization, and "diagnosis" that Rabinow took upon himself. That is, while Rabinow and Bennett's work has elsewhere been praised for its refusal of the "instrumentality" that is so often thrust upon ethical and philosophical collaborators in the scientific academy (Strathern 2010), stepping down from that level of rigor in order to forge relations should not be confused with unprincipled compliance. Meanwhile, the mere existence of this book is ample evidence that there remain spaces where we can talk and critique amongst ourselves, as anthropologists, and such spaces for professional knowledge could benefit from pliancy and perhaps even a little intellectual double-bookkeeping in the field, as long as we remain unanxiously aware of what we are doing, how the field of power we work in is structured, and where our commitments finally lie. As Max Weber (1958:152) put it, "if one wishes to settle with the devil, one must not take to flight before him.... [O]ne has to see the devil's ways to the end in order to realize his power and his limitations."

IV.

In the other experiments with anthropological pedagogy and forms of collaborative knowledge-making within the discipline that Rabinow pursues here, he has turned to the Internet and its open and graphical forms of knowledge presentation and manipulation as a solution to the problems and blockages he experienced in the hierarchical and formalized routines of the funded research center. He seeks, through these experimental spaces for learning and collaborating, to construct a more dynamic relationship between the formalisms of knowledge—the conventions and strictures of its reproduction in certain forms—and the procedures of both research and teaching. As in the initial involvement with SynBERC, the goal is to find means of collaboration, and to intervene, mid-stream, in knowledge-production before it reaches its final form in a report, product, publication, or other “deliverable.” Whatever the adjacencies of these two experiments, however, it is clear that the pedagogical collaborations—in which Rabinow was in a powerful position and very aware of its consequences—were more lived-through than the blocked participation in SynBERC. Unlike that latter project, the specifically *anthropological* collaboration was not closed off—to invoke Weber again—by a retreat into empyrean realms where gods (ideals) do battle with each other into eternity. It met other, more familiar, problems of collaboration.

In the middle of the last decade, I too was involved in a modest attempt to build an “internet platform” for scholarly knowledge—as a graduate student working with John Borneman and Gyan Prakash at Princeton University. Our effort lasted through four years of intense collaboration and multiple changes of personnel, and resulted in six curated collections of essays and interviews (still available at prok.princeton.edu). Our project was, however, conceived as a companion to the normal routines of professional communication, ambition, and advancement, not as a replacement for nor even supplement to them. We did not aim, that is, to remediate the routines of academic knowledge production *in toto*, but to open up a small space for other forms of thinking within those structures of reproduction, and hoped that our effort would provide a new point of contact with those outside the academy. We compared ourselves to the little magazines then undergoing a parallel revival in print (see the journals *Cabinet* and *A Public Space*), and organized each issue thematically, laying out points of intersection for diverse academic and lay forms of knowledge. We experimented with interviews, forums, reviews, and direct, short

questions-and-answers as part of our desire to be— hackneyed as these terms may be—both provocative and alternative.

We found that the attempt to produce a collective voice or contribute to the development of a shared field of interest involves a tremendous amount of conversation, reworking of written texts, face-to-face meetings, and embodied presence. When the project I was involved in was successful, the work of meetings, drafting, allocating tasks and coming up with future projects was all face-to-face and (more importantly) very affectively dense. Rabinow makes clear here that the same was true of Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory (ARC). Now, the venture I was involved in has suspended publication; the website of ARC (www.anthropos-lab.net) is down to less than one post per month, and little of it is original or sustained. As Rabinow notes, one lesson of such projects is that “small groupings, two or three people, demonstrate the most cohesion and productivity” (148). Perhaps time and size both impose a native limit to the successful collaborative crafting of concepts.

Rabinow distances his project from any “avant-garde” aesthetics, in part because the demand to “make it new” is already so dominant in the biotechnical arenas in which he was researching. And yet, as he defines the “contemporary” as an object of anthropological research, it produces its own problematic metaphysics of adjacency and coherence, as Rabinow seems to acknowledge as he explores the limits of the Internet as a medium of collaboration. He says that he and his collaborators naïvely “imagined the Web...as a venue that would assemble concepts, problems, practices, and qualities and bring them into a proximity that would make new capacities and affects come into being.” Indeed, the problems (and the opportunities) he describes are less about the novelty of the medium or what it assembles, than about the durable interpersonal and institutional challenges of maintaining any pedagogical community (compare Duberman 1978).

It seems that Rabinow and his students, and the group I worked with, both in our own ways misunderstood the *social* nature of the Internet, its tempos, and its appropriate forms of community. The Internet facilitates interchange and dissemination, but it is less able to host collaborations that cannot later be broken down into their constituent pieces. What the merging of these two modes of interaction and communication in the ARC looks like, finally, is a kind of serial overlay of concepts and terminologies,

progressively refined, until access at any mid-point (and it is all mid-points) becomes very difficult.

By contrast, the sustained projects of an Internet-based collaboration in anthropological knowledge, such as *Savage Minds* (savageminds.org) or *Somatosphere* (somatosphere.net), keep the pot boiling with a more heterogeneous stew, more regularly updated, of conference announcements, professional news, think pieces, and reviews and research reports. Neither concerned to define a singular project or point of focus, nor worried about the heterogeneity of voices that their “platforms” can contain, they (and other similar projects) have become truly new media, the collective voice of anthropology. Of course, they have attracted like-minded participants and something like a collective identity has emerged, but this is not the same thing as a focused and singular outcome of collaborative concept-formation of the sort that Rabinow envisaged.

As a reflection on blocked, uncomfortable, difficult, and unrewarding research and pedagogical collaborations, *The Accompaniment* confronts some real problems in the contemporary anthropological project. On this evidence, the “demands of the day” are better met by Rabinow’s return to the virtues of small *solidary* groups for thinking in—groups of contemporaries—than by the fairly abstruse considerations of risk and trust that he uses to discipline and understand his unruly interactions with scientists, or by the truncated promise of web-mediated anthropological collaborations. One paradoxical result, then, is that long-term, interpersonal, and embodied fieldwork, in which one necessarily accompanies others who may *not* be one’s contemporaries, returns to the uneasy indispensability that it had 35 years ago, when Rabinow first reflected on it. As he points out, “with humility before my teachers” (209), in the contemporary condition of banausical expertise married to routines of capitalist productivity, the anthropological vocation—including both fieldwork and reflection—offers what salvation there might be. ■

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