

NOT BRICOLAGE BUT BOATBUILDING

Exploring Two Metaphors for Thinking about Ethnography

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AS CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE, we were asked to reflect on Where has ethnography been? Where is it going? and Where should it go and why? The implicit metaphor is of a journey. And it could be read as inviting a story about the progress achieved, and about how to go forward into the future. Indeed, this might seem to be just what is required as we approach the new millennium. But of course, this type of evolutionary story is now rather outdated—so there may be a temptation to opt for something less modern! One notable alternative is Heidegger's image of a path through a forest—although presumably, it has to be the Black Forest—along which we walk in the hope of reaching a clearing where a new age will be revealed. Such millennialism may be particularly appealing at the present time.

An influential account of where qualitative research generally has come from, and where it should be going, seems to hover uneasily between these evolutionary and epiphanic models. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) have traced five "moments" through which qualitative research has passed: the traditional period, the modernist phase, blurred genres, the crisis of representation, and the fifth moment. Their discussion of this scheme carries a strong sense that some kind of progress has been made, despite the authors' postmodernist insistence that these moments are simultaneous as well as sequential (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). At the same time, the term *moment* implies discontinuity and perhaps even something like epiphany. Certainly, one of these moments—the crisis of representation—falls into this category. Lincoln describes it elsewhere as characterized by "profound anguish" (Lincoln 1995, 39). And both authors discuss the fifth moment in quasi-religious terms, thereby sharing something in spirit with Heidegger (Lincoln and Denzin 1994).

In the course of their discussion, Lincoln and Denzin identify some key features of our collective past, point to important problems, and seek to correct "excesses" (Lincoln and Denzin 1994, 576-7). They see the fifth moment, in which we are currently located, as demanding that we face up to these problems and find some way of dealing with them (although whether the problems can be resolved remains to be seen; this is perhaps too modernist a view of what is required for their tastes anyway). I share their sense that we are at a crucial point in the development of ethnography, and of social research generally; and I want to engage in a dialogue with their work as a basis for looking at the past and toward the future. It should be said, however, that my view of what is required differs profoundly from theirs.

Central to Lincoln and Denzin's (1994) discussion of the fifth moment is the idea of the researcher as "bricoleur." Now, this term is by no means unequivocal. In colloquial French usage, it means a "jack of all trades (and master of none)," or even a "small-time crook" (Hérail and Lovatt 1984). In an academic context, the term was popularized by Lévi-Strauss (1966), who used it to refer to the "savage" or "wild" forms of thought he regarded as characteristic of the neolithic age, to which he contrasted modern science. He sees the bricoleur as solving problems by making do with whatever resources are to hand; whereas engineers or scientists solve problems through reflection, extending their collective understanding, and inventing new techniques on the basis of that knowledge. Another part of the contrast for Lévi-Strauss is that the bricoleur relies on what is apparent, on the concrete, whereas the scientist seeks to uncover underlying mechanisms. Thus, Lévi-Strauss treats myths as bricolage par excellence, as an attempt to make sense of the world as a whole by blending together whatever is available into a complete story, whereas the scientist is more restricted in what can and cannot currently be claimed as knowledge.

Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) use of bricoleur departs from its colloquial meaning in some key respects—there is no suggestion of a lack of expertise for example. And they do not operate in quite the same theoretical context as Lévi-Strauss (1966) either. While the latter argues that bricolage and science are

parallel modes of acquiring knowledge, rather than different stages in the development of the human mind, and while he is keen to emphasize the rationality of both, it is clear that in his view (for all its achievements) bricolage is inferior to science in its capacity to understand and deal with the world. Thus, Lévi-Strauss sees anthropology as *studying* bricolage rather than as being bricolage itself. By contrast, Denzin and Lincoln use bricolage as a model for social research. They take its central feature to be pragmatic flexibility—the use of multiple ideas, perspectives, and methods, with none privileged and none ruled out. They see these diverse materials as being pieced together to produce an emergent construction: “a complex, dense, reflexive collage-like creation that represents the researcher’s images, understandings and interpretations of the world or phenomenon under analysis” (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, 3). On their account, the task of research seems close to the creation of myths.

A key question to ask here is the following: With what are Denzin and Lincoln (1994) contrasting bricolage? It seems likely that they retain the contrast with science; but they differ from Lévi-Strauss (1966), not just in their evaluation of it as a model for social research but also in their conception of what science involves. While they do not say so explicitly, it seems that the opposite of the bricoleur for them is the technician, interpreted as someone who follows a single method *rigidly*. If so, what needs to be said, at the very least, is that this is not the only possible characterization of science. Furthermore, a dimension rather than a dichotomy is involved—centering on degree of flexibility or eclecticism; and no positive evaluation can automatically be attached to flexibility. While it may be difficult to see how inflexibility could be defended, there are formulations which show the other side. For example, my dictionary of synonyms gives *rigorous* as one alternative to *inflexible*, the implication being that a flexible approach lacks rigor. Yet, Denzin and Lincoln explicitly see bricolage as adding rigor. Similarly, while the term *eclecticism* may have a largely favorable resonance, this is not true of all its synonyms. Discussing, appropriately enough, the reception of Saussure in France, Angenot characterizes the result as syncretism and defines this as

"factitious amalgamation of dissimilar ideas or theses that look compatible only insofar as they are not clearly conceived" (Angenot 1984, 159). Who would be in favor of eclecticism of this kind? Indeed, Lincoln and Denzin themselves recognize the problem of a false eclecticism by drawing the line at combining or mixing paradigms (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, 2); although it is difficult to see why any self-respecting bricoleur would abide by this restriction.

There are problems with bricolage as a model for ethnographic work, then. I can clarify these, and outline an alternative view, by returning to the journey metaphor I began with; this time interpreted in nautical terms. Doing this, I will follow one of Lincoln and Denzin's (1994) own recommendations: that we should "revisit the past" and, in doing so, resist the tendency to dismiss what we find there as *passé*. The metaphor I will use is not the Titanic, tempting though that is, but what often is referred to as Neurath's boat. Otto Neurath was a German sociologist (although this is not how he is usually remembered) who lived in the first half of the twentieth century. In one of his books, he compares the task of scientists to that of

sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the base. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support. In this manner, by using the old beams and driftwood, the ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction. (Neurath 1973, 199; see also Cartwright et al. 1996)

So, parts of the boat can be replaced, but only if enough of the rest is left intact for it to remain seaworthy.

Now, in the second half of the twentieth century, ethnographers and qualitative researchers have been engaged in increasingly manic rebuilding of their boat. In the 1950s through to the 1970s, they became more self-conscious about the distinctiveness of their approach, appealing for instance to the Chicago School and to symbolic interactionism, and in the process formulating a tradition out of what was previously much less well defined. Even the widespread use of the term *ethnography* by sociologists seems to date only from this period. At the same time, there were also external influences that shaped the

process of reconstruction, notably phenomenology (through the writings of Alfred Schutz and the work of ethnomethodologists) and Marxism (especially the young Marx and Critical Theory). In the 1980s and 1990s, the boat rebuilding became even more frenetic, this time under the influence of winds blowing from France rather than Germany. What has come to be called postmodernism generated challenging questions; for instance, about the very possibility of producing factual knowledge of the social world, on the grounds that all accounts are artifacts or even fictions—they are made, if not made up. This encouraged literary interpretations of the role of the researcher and also politically activist ones that emphasize the power of symbols and rhetoric.

All this rebuilding has produced considerable diversification in approach and also the blending of elements from different sources. This is presumably where Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) bricolage comes in. Indeed, it turns out that they are true bricoleurs after all: like others (for example Gubrium and Holstein 1997), in practice they too seek to blend together different paradigms. Thus, having argued that the past needs to be revisited and excesses avoided, they go on to spell out the basis on which we should proceed, putting together a heady mixture of critical, feminist, and poststructuralist/postmodernist ideas (Lincoln and Denzin 1994). Now this might be fine if we were engaged in producing collage; but it is not a good basis for boat building. The latter requires that the various parts of the boat match one another: they have to make a coherent whole if water is not to seep in. But the various ideas on which Lincoln and Denzin (1994) draw do not fit together; indeed, some of them conflict with any aspiration to create a coherent whole. Thus, much poststructuralist and postmodernist thought was directed against Marxism and critical theory and particularly against the concept of totality which is central to them. Similarly, as some feminists have recognized, postmodernism challenges the gender categories on which feminists rely. It also corrodes the idea that research, or anything else, can be liberatory, along with any conception of authentic subjectivity. So, mixing critical, feminist, and postmodernist ideas may be bricolage, but it is not good shipbuilding.

As readers may infer from this, my view is that we are in severe danger of sinking, in large part because we have been trying to rebuild our boat to different plans. And this reflects divergent ideas, not just about what is necessary for us to remain (or to become) seaworthy but also about what is or should be our destination and, therefore, about the kind of boat we need. Of course, some postmodernists might question the very idea of a destination. From their point of view, not only is it better to travel in hope—or perhaps even in despair—than to arrive, but the very notion of arriving is a myth: a complement to the myth of origin, the idea that the journey had some beginning in the past. For them, if you like, the boat we are on is the Flying Dutchman.

Perhaps, this is the kind of excess that Lincoln and Denzin (1994) believe must be corrected. But even so, faced with the danger of sinking, bricolage does not offer us any hope of survival; particularly given the nature of much of the material to hand. Somehow, we need to develop a coherent sense of where we are going and of how we need to rebuild our vessel to sail in the right direction.

It is difficult to be optimistic about the prospects for agreement about this, but there are two moves we can make that might help. First, I think we do need to look back to where we set out from, and where we were originally heading. In practice, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) do not serve us very well here. They describe the history of social research in the first half of the twentieth century as governed by positivism, anachronistically describing this as the traditional period, with all the other four moments occurring in the second half of the century. Moreover, each subsequent moment is shorter than the previous one, until we approach the present. They go from fifty years, to twenty years, to sixteen years, down to four years, and four years again. This is presentism with a vengeance.

Instead of this, I suggest, we need a more evenly balanced view of our past. Labeling the views of Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Mead, Bateson, the Chicago School of Sociology, and so on, as *positivist* is unhelpful; not just because that term has become little more than an insult but also because used in this global way, it homogenizes great diversity. I can illustrate this

point by the case of Otto Neurath himself. Unlike the social scientists I have just mentioned, he did call himself a positivist. He was the organizing force behind the Vienna Circle, whose manifesto is often taken as a central document of twentieth century positivist philosophy (Neurath 1973). Yet, his boat metaphor indicates that even he did not adhere to what is regarded today as the central feature of that philosophy: a foundationalist epistemology. In terms of his metaphor, a foundationalist would be someone who believed that boatbuilding can take place only on land; for example, in a dry dock, where we can build from the bottom up. In my view, given the fruitful heterogeneity of the ideas that have shaped ethnography in the past, we must take Lincoln and Denzin (1994) at their word (rather than their deed) in examining where we have come from on our journey so far. And we must do this, if not without prejudice, then at least in a spirit of dialogue with the past, so that our current prejudices remain open to challenge.

A second requirement is that we look at the present position of ethnography—and indeed of social research generally—in relation to other activities that are analogous to it in various respects, such as journalism, politics, and literature. Lincoln and Denzin (1994) also recommend this; indeed, they advocate the use of literary models (see also Denzin 1997). But what justification is there for ethnographers trying to compete directly with Virginia Woolf or even with Tom Wolfe? This seems futile and amounts to neglect of the distinctive contribution that social science can make to our understanding of the world. There is not just one boat on the high seas but many, and we need to keep our distance from the others if we are to avoid collisions. Of course, there is nothing wrong with the humanities, political journalism, or imaginative literature and poetry; indeed, we can learn a great deal from them. But they are different from social science. It is not possible to do them effectively through social research, or social research through them. Where is the convincing argument in favor of blurring genres as a general policy? What we should be doing, in my view, is using our understanding of other intellectual activities to clarify the proper function and nature of social research.

There is a practical aspect to this as well. In Britain, and I suspect it is happening elsewhere also, there are increasingly insistent demands that social science demonstrates the practical contribution it makes to society. These demands are often based on false assumptions about the nature of the contribution that can reasonably be expected, and to a considerable extent they infringe academic freedom. Nevertheless, some of the developments in ethnographic research in the last two decades of the twentieth century seem to me to breach the implicit contract that underlies the public funding of social science. Academic freedom is only one side of that contract. The other side is the obligation to produce value-relevant *knowledge*. Denying that such knowledge is possible, or redefining *knowledge* to mean *illuminating fictions* or *partisan perspectives* represents a flouting of that obligation as generally understood, and the contract is unlikely to be renegotiable. The storm may not happen overnight, but when it comes the consequences could be very serious.

A central message that ought to be taken from Neurath's metaphor is that because we are always faced with the task of rebuilding our craft at sea, everything cannot be questioned at once. Yet, a great deal of the methodological rethinking of qualitative research over the past forty years has labored under the illusion that we can begin again from scratch, that what we need is a new paradigm (I have been guilty of this myself in the past); and this despite vociferous rejection of foundationalism. Neurath's metaphor neatly indicates the likely result. However, there is also a more fundamental point that can be read into the metaphor: that there are some parts of the boat that it would be very difficult if not impossible to change, without courting disaster. Were we to start removing planks from the hull, we would no longer be afloat. In other words, within any activity—including research—there are some matters that are beyond all practical questioning, even though we may not be able to provide more than instrumental justifications for them.

This point can be elaborated using a different metaphor and a different philosopher, one whose work was a major source for the Vienna Circle but whose reputation has fared better than

Neurath's, even influencing Lyotard's postmodernism. Ludwig Wittgenstein put forward the notion that particular concepts and assumptions provide the "hinges" of an activity, without which it cannot be pursued (Wittgenstein 1969). To use one of his examples, historians today cannot show *beyond all possible doubt* that the world was not created only 150 years ago, albeit in such a way as to make it appear to be much, much older than this; any more than geologists can show *beyond all possible doubt* that the earth is older than the bible implies. Yet, there is no point in historians or geologists entertaining these doubts seriously. The very activities in which they are engaged are premised on the existence of a past that extends over centuries and millennia. The same line of argument can be applied more generally to the forms of antirealism that are fashionable among qualitative researchers today. There is paradox involved in asking how we are to determine the truth of statements about truth. And exploring that paradox, addressing the arguments of epistemological skeptics, has been enormously fruitful in philosophy. But to use that paradox as a way of rejecting the concept of truth within research makes no sense—because that concept is essential to what doing research *means*. (It is also essential to our lives outside of research: in law courts, in politics, and in our mundane dealings with the world. Surely ethnographers, of all people, would not overlook this?)

Switching back to Neurath's metaphor, what must be accepted as given is that we are in a boat of a particular kind, designed for a particular destination; in short, that there are limits to the kind of rebuilding we can engage in. During the first two of Lincoln and Denzin's (1994) "moments," there was little or no disagreement about these fundamental matters. The immediate task of social enquiry was to produce knowledge rather than to achieve any other kind of goal; even though the hope was that this knowledge would help us to achieve a better society. Thus, Neurath believed that scientific knowledge could contribute to a social reorganization that would improve the lives of all, and especially the working class. He was not just a sociologist and a philosopher but also a socialist politician, serving in the government of Bavaria in the 1920s. But he and others saw the contribution of research to social change as a byproduct, not as its

immediate goal. And as Lofland has pointed out, many ethnographers in the second half of the twentieth century have shared this commitment to untrammelled enquiry and to the production of generic knowledge (Lofland 1995). Moreover, there are good practical as much as theoretical reasons for retaining that commitment. At the very least, we must recognize that abandoning it changes the activity we are engaged in. What I am suggesting is that those who want to be poets or political activists, or both, should not pretend that they can simultaneously be social researchers.

Of course, this old-fashioned idea about our proper destination is widely dismissed today on the grounds that cumulative generic knowledge is impossible, and that other goals—ethical and political—must be substituted. This is Lincoln and Denzin's view (Lincoln and Denzin 1994, 579). Yet, these doubts about the possibility of knowledge did not come as a blinding revelation in the 1980s, in the epiphanic moment of the crisis of representation. All of the skeptical arguments on which Lincoln and Denzin and others rely have been known throughout the millennium that is now coming to a close. Indeed, they were developed by the Pyrrhonian skeptics around the end, not of the previous millenium, but of the one before that (see Schofield, Burnyeat, and Barnes 1980). These ideas have been given a lot of attention by philosophers since that time. But they are not the decisive arguments they are currently taken to be by some qualitative researchers, not the least because any thoroughgoing skepticism is self-refuting. And, even if this is denied, it should be noted that skepticism is as corrosive of ethical and political beliefs as it is of claims to factual knowledge. As a result, it provides no basis for reinventing ethnography as social criticism, for example.

This last point is perhaps the most decisive of all. It is striking how skepticism has typically been used to attack other positions so as to leave the field open for the writer's own preferred beliefs. This is what Lincoln and Denzin do. Having assured us of the demise of truth, they then bring in their own political and ethical "Truths," as if these were not equally vulnerable to skepticism. Of course, as I noted earlier, for them, the ethnographer is no longer a student of myths but rather a mythmaker: the aim is

to conjure up stories that will serve as myths for the new age. But it is not clear on what grounds they could believe that their myths are better than those of others.

Here, we come full circle: the logical positivism of Neurath and others treated science as an essential antidote to the new age myths that were prevalent in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s, to which the ideas of Heidegger were closely related. The metaphor of the boat I have used occurs in Neurath's critical analysis of what he refers to as the "soul mythology" of Oswald Spengler—a bricoleur if ever there was one (Neurath 1973, 189). As the positivists discovered, in dealing with Spengler and even with more substantial figures such as Heidegger, an essential piece of boatbuilding equipment is Ockham's razor; and I suggest that there is need for it again—to cut away the mystification that has built up about the task that we are engaged in. What is required is clear, not blurred, vision.

Mythical Greek sailors blamed sirens at the shore for drawing boats onto the rocks. Today, the danger seems to come from missionaries on board. Witness the new age religiosity to which Lincoln and Denzin appeal at the end of their discussion of the fifth moment. What is required, they say, is a new spirituality—a "sacred science" no less (Lincoln and Denzin 1994, 582-3). Here, I cannot but resort to the tempting metaphor I said I would resist: if this is the view from the bridge, there are icebergs ahead.

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