

## **From Field to Location : Aspects of Non-Reflexivity in Problematizing the 'Field' in Anthropology**

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**Abstract :** *The present study critically analyzes the scholarly attempts of problematizing the 'field' in anthropology. The existing scholarship is interested in explicating the power relations involved in the production of the field and the knowledge it generates. In this study, I argue that, the acclaimed post-disciplinary attempts to incorporate voice of the marginalized in the anthropological knowledge through deconstructing some of its basic concepts are not a derivative of the experientially learned existentiality of the phenomena analyzed rather is a mechanical application of already available tools produced in the situatedness they are critical of and is embodied by the rationality of the situation it gave birth to.*

**Keywords :** *Anthropology, Field, location, reflexivity, post-disciplinarity*

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## Introduction

The present note critically analyzes the scholarly attempts of problematizing the 'field' in anthropology. A few recent discussions on the 'field' construct, by and large, as a discursively constructed dominating notion that determining anthropological practice. None of them are ruling out the relevance of doing fieldwork, rather they are interested in explicating the power relations involved in the production of the field and the knowledge it generates, which is for them either Western or White or masculine, or all and more. A consequent argument evolving out of these writings is the call for acknowledging the marginal; that is, reckoning the voice of the hitherto constructed 'Other'; where, along with explaining a few recent alternatives conception of 'field', they anchor on the point of 'returning home' contrary to the dominant argument of fieldwork as 'going out of home'. Yet another strategy advocated is the 'decentering of the field' and urge for doing 'multi-sited' fieldwork. Basically focusing on the arguments of Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, and James Clifford, in their articles appeared in the work title *Anthropological Locations*, an attempt is made in this essay to expose the epistemic paradigm within which they problematized of the concept of 'field'. I will focus on four main notions of the field emerges in these writings, viz., the 'field' as product of unequal power relations, 'field' as discursive construction, 'field' as product of spatial practice, and the 'field' as *habitus*.

### Field as a Product of Unequal Power Relation

I will begin with analyzing Gupta and Ferguson's statement of the construction of 'field of unequal power relations'. (35) The world as a single system, or the notion of the world as an interconnected web, has become a moving spirit of Gupta and Ferguson in arguing that contemporary world is a deterritorialized and interconnected world. They presume that in such an interconnected world social scientific enquiry demands a corresponding deterritorialized ethnographic undertaking. This, on the one hand, is a resistance against the still dominating colonial attitude of anthropology of conception of field as an isolated place and on the other a liberative 'mode of study that cares about, and pays attention to, the interlocking of multiple social-political sites and locations'. (37)

This theoretical position of Gupta and Ferguson can be criticized from two directions; one is by looking at the epistemological level and the other by looking at the anthropological practices preceding post-colonial and post-disciplinary thinking. Gupta and Ferguson's argument emerges from seemingly apparent critique

of Kantian enlightenment thinking that rules modern western knowledge production. Enlightenment modernity is believed as a process that releases us from the status of 'immaturity.' By 'immaturity,' Kant means a certain state of our will that makes us accept someone else's authority to lead us in areas where the use of reason is called for. He would also add that the reason for immaturity is none other than man himself. Therefore, to be civilized and developed one should accept reason and rational thinking. What is produced as reason that liberates people from immaturity is the rationality of the west. This is in a way rejection of the possibilities of the existence of other rationalities and interpellation of the western rationality on the other. Post-structural, post-modern and post-colonial thinking emerge criticizing this enlightenment rationality. Anti-enlightenment spirit of the larger postmodernist stand is well epitomized in many of the sentences in the work under review.

Now we will go into the epistemological foundation of dependency theory, one of the sources of Gupta and Ferguson in critiquing the dominant notion of the field. Dependency theory is very much founded in the enlightenment rationality and in a sense still is not an attempt to deconstruct the very notion of development itself, rather reservations towards development are raised within the paradigm. Secondly, it is a meta(mega)-narrative. The theoretical paradigm that the post-modern anthropologists anchor on openly declared their 'incredulity towards meta-narrative'. Gupta and Ferguson's detailed historical overview of alternate fieldwork tradition under the sub-title 'heterodoxies' in anthropology and the statement that, "[t]he alternative to evaluating anthropologists according to prevailing norms of fieldwork is not to forgo all evaluation (which would be neither possible nor desirable), but to develop different and better-justified criteria of evaluation, based on a different conception of what should count as 'good work' in anthropology" (18) bear evidences of the ambivalence of the authors in eschewing enlightenment modernity as such, even when they criticizes it. What I am arguing is that, while Gupta and Ferguson critiquing enlightenment rationality they are using concept that has its very foundations in the rationality they are critiquing. The ambivalence shows that the arguments are made not on the basis of genuine understanding of the dynamics of the 'location' they are talking about rather their dependency towards uncritically accepted theoretical paradigm. It should either be viewed as a consciously made intervention with larger political demands of the age of its production, which is 'a celebration of differences' to better consumption for the global capital that runs on market logic. Or it should be considered as misrecognition or non-self reflexivity, by that I mean, failure to understand and reservation to

problematize the very foundations of the conditions of the production of one's own thoughts and actions. Here, though, knowledge production will expose one kind of power relations, it also exerts another tacitly to effectuate domination.

Second reservation to accept their argument lies in their undermining of the already available anthropology practice of doing fieldwork multi-sited. Both Michael Burawoy and Bruce Kapferer argue that the multiple-sited fieldwork is not an invention resulted out of the critical intervention of postmodernism rather directions towards that end are very much within anthropological methodology. To quote Kapferer, "If Gluckman's perspective is no longer distinctive, itself being overtaken by events, it anticipated many later developments, and its relevance still continues. This is especially so in an era of globalization, [...]and in a context of anthropological revision, when there is a cry in some quarters for a multi-sited field strategy [...], the point of which lay behind situational analysis and the kinds of problems upon which Gluckman and his colleagues focused." (113) Burawoy writes, "[...] the Manchester anthropologists traveled to town with their notebooks and settled among the urban population of the Copperbelt. There they began to study the forces that were having such a dramatic impact on the rural areas." (18). Again "The Manchester anthropologists did not study urbanism from the standpoint of the breakdown of social ties, the breakdown of tribal mores. Their point of comparison was not tribal life in the village but the industrial revolution in England." (18)

The multi-sited ethnographic project the postmodernists suggest as alternative tacitly recommends unhealthy comparison of sites that bears on different spatial relations and rationalities. The social relations of productions of the multi-sites they are arguing for has to be studied also in its own right, the continuing relation they assumed due to the presence of certain elements in these sites would be having multiple meaning in relation to the specific situation in which they are positioned, which, I think, Gupta and Ferguson often undermines, though the very theory they utilizes demands such a treatment. These are projected for eschewing power relations and overcoming reproduction of the dominant paradigm. But how far these methods have advanced from the extended case methods has to be reviewed. The Manchester school has the intelligence to view the meaning produced in different situations, both diachronic and synchronic, as different, whereas the postmodern multi-sited fieldwork undermines the incommensurability the meaning in different relations of position produced through practices. It became so primarily due to their adherence to discourse rather than to practice.

### **Field as Discursive Construction**

Another dimension of conceiving 'field' in Gupta and Ferguson's article is that, it is a discursive construction. The genealogy of the present understanding of the field is a discursive effect of enunciatory practice starting from 'Malinowskian revolution' and through peripheralizing a few other alternative perceptions of the 'field'. In the introductory part of the article they state why they are interested in studying the 'field' in the following lines: "Yet this idea of 'the field', although central to our intellectual and professional identities, remains a largely unexamined one in contemporary anthropology. The concept of culture has been vigorously critiqued and dissected in recent years [...]; ethnography as a genre of writing has been made visible and critically analyzed [...]; the dialogic encounters that constitute fieldwork experience have been explored [...]; even the peculiar textual genre of fieldnotes has been subjected to reflection and analysis [...]. But what of 'the field' itself, the place where the distinctive work of 'fieldwork' may be done, that taken-for-granted space in which an 'Other' culture or society lies waiting to be observed and written? This mysterious space- not the 'what' of anthropology but the 'where'- has been left to common sense, beyond and below the threshold of reflexivity." (2) This is the ground for legitimizing their action of deconstructing 'the field'. Two points are emphasized here, one is the necessity of making an updated knowledge on 'the field', since it remained untouched while other basic 'tropes' of anthropological research were deconstructed and second the distinction between commonsense knowledge and scholarly knowledge and reflexivity.

As already said their assertion is made possible not by objectivizing one's own universe of thought rather employing an already available theoretical tool in a different context. Foucaultian discourse analysis is the theoretical basis for the presentation of the argument which is an exposition of power relations in the production of truth. Foucault would argue that, it is not the essential character of an object that creates the object as such rather a set of serious statements enunciated objectifying an object leading to the constitution of the object itself. Or in other words, he would argue that subjects are produced as a discursive effect. Gupta and Ferguson is employing the same notion to expose that 'the field' is a discursive construction through selective appropriation and projection of a set of statements and documents on the one hand and marginalizing others on the other, to effectuate the assumptions in the statements as true and valid. It is the knowledge-power nexus that creates these truth effects and not the immanent character of the object observed, is what they would argue. Employing this Foucaultian concept to

problematize ‘the field’ in anthropology they are, in a sense, bringing into criticism anthropological works. But I would argue that reflexivity is not the same as subjecting a work of science to criticism and evaluation after it has been produced. Such re-examinations of frameworks, methods, etc., if practiced as a matter of course, will bring about gradual transformation in the normal procedures to a discipline. Reflexivity, on the other hand, is that quality of social scientific work which problematizes the enquiry itself while it is in progress. Also, a reflexive social scientist should bear in mind that, the power-knowledge relation he/she is critically viewing can incur in the very critical enquiry one is engaged in the present, constituting yet another set of relations. So a self-reflexive social scientific production demands not merely exposition of the power relations in the existing knowledge production rather also in the practice of exposing the same in the alternative.

### **Field as Spatial Practice and Habitus**

James Clifford also problematizes the field, but not exactly like what Gupta and Ferguson have been done, though elements of the same are there. His arguments rather has two dimensions, one, it as a ‘spatial practice’ constituted through relations of positions of various agents occupying the field and second, the field as ‘habitus’. The field as social space is defined utilizing Michael de Certeau’s notion of space. Clifford says, “For de Certeau, ‘space’ is never ontologically given. It is discursively mapped and corporeally practiced. An urban neighborhood, for example, may be laid out physically according to a street plan. But it is not a space until it is practiced by people’s active occupation, their movements through and around it. In this perspective, there is nothing given about a ‘field’. It must be worked, turned into a discrete social space, by embodied practices of interactive travel.”(186)As I have already mentioned Clifford too belongs to post-disciplinary social scientist. But how far the argument he is making is revolutionary in liberating ‘field’ from the colonial power relations is still ambiguous. For example, juxtapose the above quoted sentence, where he is emphasizing on the point of looking at the relations that constitutes a space/field rather than its geographical locatedness, with what Evans-Pritchard’s inductively arrived at argument on the political institutions and livelihood of the Nuer, which he wrote in 1940. To quote: “It[political relations]cannot very easily be pictured diagrammatically, for political relations are relative and dynamic. They are best stated as tendencies to conform to certain values in certain situations, and the value is determined by the structural relationships of the persons who compose the situation. Thus whether and on which side a man fights in a dispute

depends on the structural relationship of the persons engaged in it and of his won relationship to each party.”(137)The difference between these two arguments lies not largely in the implications of their statements rather in the procedure of reaching at these points. Clifford arrived at his inference through an employment of already available concepts in a locality, whereas Evan-Pritchard had arrived at a similar position experientially analyzing the social relations he has been interacting with. The former therefore becomes a generative of the theoretical position and the later derivative of an analysis of the practice of the people in a locatedness. The social resources Clifford have at his disposal facilitated his act of ‘objectivising’ the anthropological practice of perceiving the field and also selection of the very task of enquiry. Will he ever be able to objectivize the very effect of his objectivation? Unless and until he can, it will remain non-reflexive and as another institutional practice of ‘producing knowledge’. Experiencing constraints on the choice of the research problems and the type of knowledge produced is a commonplace today among social scientists. This also has the consequence of turning the theory pale and detachable from the empirical accounts manufactured from research centres.

Clifford’s argument that the notion of ‘the field’ in anthropology as habitus, that, as an *embodied* disposition and practice of anthropology, has the advantage of recognizing it as a disciplinary bias, which a social scientist should overcome to produce objective knowledge. Postmodernist researchers are able to expose the bias of knowledge generated out of social origins of the researcher by indicating class, gender, ethnic and regional determinism in interpretation. For example, while interpreting archetypal field as construction of western white masculine bias, they are doing it. Clifford has moved a step further in exposing disciplinary bias stating the field as habitus. He argues that the “fieldwork habitus of the Malinowskian generation appears as the articulation of specific, disciplined practices.” (199)and that “a disciplinary habitus has been sustained around the embodied activity of fieldwork: an ungendered, unraced, sexually inactive subject interacts intensively (on hermeneutic/scientific levels, at the very least) with interlocutors. If actual experiences in the field have diverged from the norm, if the taboos have sometimes been broken, and if the disciplinary habitus is now publicly contested, its normative power remains.” (202) But the very instrument that made Clifford to think this way has an extension, which he undermined tacitly that urges us to be critical of our intellectual bias. By intellectual bias, Bourdieu meant, intellectual attempt to see the world ‘as spectacle’ and ‘a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically’. (39) Reflexivity for him is “the

systematic exploration of the ‘unthought categories of thought which delimit the thinkable and predetermine the thought’ as well as guide the practical carrying out of social inquiry. [...] What has been constantly scrutinized and *neutralized, in the very act of construction of the object*, is the collective scientific unconscious embedded in theories, problems, and (especially national) categories of scholarly judgment. It follows that the subject of reflexivity must ultimately be the social scientific field *in toto*.” (40)

### Conclusion

What I have been arguing is that, the acclaimed post disciplinary attempts to incorporate voice of the hitherto marginalized in the anthropological knowledge through deconstructing some of its basic concepts are not a derivative of the experientially learned existentiality of the phenomena analyzed rather is a mechanical application of already available tools produced in the situatedness they are critical of and is embodied by the rationality of the situation it gave birth to. Secondly, social scientific theorizing demands reflexivity, if they really want to produce objective knowledge, which should be achieved through problematizing one’s own enquiry while it is in progress.

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