Doing Critical Ethnography

BEGINNING TO THINK CRITICALLY

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This chapter shifts from an overview of the ethnographic enterprise to a summary of its critical substance. Critical thinking is a metaphor that provides a value orientation, and the conflict between value-laden research and the norms of “objective science” poses problems for all researchers. This conflict must be confronted, lest our “science” be reduced to little more than articulate opinions. Not all critical scholars proceed in the same manner, and the conclusion of this chapter summarizes how some researchers implement it.

The term critical describes both an activity and an ideology. As social activity, critical thinking implies a call to action that may range from modest rethinking of comfortable thoughts to more direct engagement that includes political activism. As ideology, critical thinking provides a shared body of principles about the relationship among knowledge, its consequences, and scholars’ obligations to society. The goal of critical thinking, however, is not to create like-minded ideologues or to recreate the world in one’s own image. Rather, it challenges the relationship between all forms of inquiry and the reality studied and sustained.

Critical thinking challenges “truth” in ways that subvert taken-for-granted ways of thinking. As social scientists, we have become adept at expanding empirical limits for other researchers, but the new “facts” rarely contribute to reflective judgments. They only provide the basis for further accumulation of more facts and the narrative theories to “explain” them. We lack—or avoid—the wisdom to apply our knowledge to our personal and political lives (Mills, 1970). Critical thinking addresses this failure by not assuming the reality of “facts” and by recognizing that revelation is not merely announcing, but is instead a juxtaposition of and dialogue about alternative images.

The roots of critical thought spread from a long tradition of intellectual rebellion in which rigorous examination of ideas and discourse constituted political challenge. Social critique, by definition, is radical. It implies an evaluative judgment of meaning and method in research, policy, and human activity. Critical thinking implies freedom by recognizing that social existence, including our knowledge of it, is not simply composed
of givens imposed on us by powerful and mysterious forces. This recognition leads to the possibility of transcending existing social conditions. The act of critique implies that by thinking about and acting upon the world, we are able to change both our subjective interpretations and objective conditions. Freedom, as a component of critique, connects the emancipatory, normative, and evaluative features of critical thought.

Freedom, first of all, implies that man is not totally encompassed and submerged in that which he \textit{de facto} is. The norm, secondly, is a demand made with respect to the facts. Finally, the value is a special light which must be distinguished from the light provided by the fact. (Quant, 1967, p. 30)

Critical thought challenges ideational (symbolic) and structural conditions not of our making:

Critical self-consciousness is the ability (stifled in some, developed in others) to discern in any “scheme of association,” including those one finds attractive and compelling, the partisan aims it hides from view; and the claim is that as it performs this negative task, critical self-consciousness participates in the positive task of formulating schemes of associations (structures of thought and government) that are in the service not of a particular party but of all mankind. (Fish, 1989, p. 497)

Critique conveys \textit{freedom} in that it acknowledges the capability to explore alternative meanings without constraint. It denotes \textit{value} because it requires a discerning rational judgment in order to choose between conceptual and existential alternatives, and it suggests \textit{norms} to guide both the discourse and interpretative activity of knowing.

\section*{Critical Ethnography as Metaphor}

Critical ethnographers do not reject the canons of science; instead they challenge its central metaphors and the way they symbolize their objects. Among significant variations between conventional and critical models of science, the most profound is
between their central metaphors, or ways of seeing: mechanism (predictable systems of operation) and organicism (process and integration), respectively (Pepper, 1948, p. 280). Different metaphors obviously produce different sets of images to study, because they de-emphasize differences by categorizing sameness in the objects they represent (Lodge, 1977: 75). For example, viewing a given behavior as a pathology in which the actor is acted upon by forces impelling a particular behavior gives us a dramatically different focus than viewing the behavior as meaningful action upon the world in which those behaviors might symbolize resistance.

The works of early social-disorganization ethnographers from the Chicago school (R. Cavan, 1928; Cressey, 1932; Thomas & Znaniecki, 1927) illustrate this metaphorical difference. Theories of crime at the turn of the century depicted an image of deviant behavior as the result of abnormalities of the offender. The resulting metaphors of individual pathology created an imagery of the criminal as “different” or “sick.” Some ethnic groups, such as Italians and Irish, were perceived as more criminally inclined than others, because the areas in which they lived had proportionally higher crime rates. The pioneering work of Shaw and McKay (1929), however, suggested that the crime rates of these groups decreased as they moved from the impoverished urban areas where crime was heaviest into more genteel neighborhoods. Ethnographers from the Chicago school suggested that there was something about the poverty of cities that disrupted the social fabric of those areas. This disruption contributed to criminal activity by creating “socially disorganized” areas that possessed fewer informal mechanisms for social control. The metaphor of social disorganization produced radically different images of criminal activity, the criminal, and the social milieu in which crime occurred than did the medical metaphor of pathology, which focused on the individual. The social-disorganization metaphors depicted the social milieu, not the offender, as “sick.”

All knowledge and concepts are metaphorical in that they provide icons and mapping techniques for interpreting and speaking about the social terrain. The contours of the social world depicted by theories provide ways of both seeing and moving about within it. Metaphors allow us to examine and discuss our objects from several perspectives by employing alternative sets of images. Metaphors do not reproduce mirrorlike representations of the objects they characterize. Instead, they give directions for finding the images that are intended to be associated with that thing (White, 1978, p. 91). They
have a focus and a frame that suggests interpretive rules for assigning meaning to them
and the language by which we name and pull together those meanings (Hawkes, 1972; Manning, 1983).

The critical metaphor refers to a fundamental image of the world from which illustrative
analogues may be derived (Thomas & O’Maolchatha, 1989). As metaphor, critical
ethnography directs attention to symbols of oppression by shifting and contrasting
cultural images in ways that reveal subtle qualities of social control. The critical
metaphor also provides hints for reconceptualizing behavior, values, or social
institutions into meanings from which to “read off” deeper structural characteristics such
as ideology, power, domination, and structural logic (Habermas, 1971). The label critical
ethnography conveys a particular social imagery invoked by scholars, and it is this
invocation of a particular style of creating images that places one within or outside of
the critical ambit. When critical ethnography is understood as a metaphor rather than a
theory, the debate between conventional and critical scholars is not over differing truth
claims, but over the metaphoric images that drive knowledge production.

Critical thinking begins with the recognition that ideas possess a dual-edged capacity to
both control and liberate, and adherents pursue knowledge by challenging conventional,
taken-for-granted conceptions about the world and about how we think about it in order
to move beyond “what is” to a state of “what could be.” Because critical ethnography
begins its scientific enterprise from a set of value-laden premises, however, the question for critical ethnographers is whether one can begin researching with a set of values without distorting the research process.

**Confronting “Value-Free” Facts**

To begin from a premise that social constraints exist and that research should be
emancipatory and directed at those constraints is an explicitly value-laden position. The
fact-value problem centers upon the distinction between scientific claims, which are
produced by evidence and demonstration, and value claims, which are produced by
rhetoric and reason.
Facts are those tidbits of knowledge that can be demonstrated to be true, such as “today is Monday” or “spaghetti does not grow on trees.” Values refer to normative statements about an object, such as “Mondays are bad” or “spaghetti is good.” For those adhering to strict separation between the two, we can say that roses are red or that the social status of women is less than that of men, but we cannot say, as a scientific claim, that roses are beautiful or that kindness is preferable to cruelty.

All knowledge ultimately reflects a set of norms and values about what is worth examining and how. Sometimes values are implicit in the questions we ask, in the operational definitions we use, or in how we conceptualize an act. For example, to study “deviance” is to begin with a definition of behavior with roots in social norms, not in science. Studies of prison management assume, for better or worse, that it is desirable that prison administrators, not prisoners, run the prisons. The penetration of values is unavoidable, and the solution is not to try to expunge them from research, but rather to identify them and assess their impact.

THE LEGACY OF MAX WEBER

Although Max Weber is considered a progenitor of conventional social science, his work contains significant insights—and cautions—for critical analysts. Weber's essays “Politics as a Vocation” and “Science as a Vocation” (1946) provide insights into the claim that critical research need not be tainted by passing “ought” statements off as facts. Weber contended that facts and values led to two fundamentally different kinds of statements. He argued for value-neutral research, a term whose meaning has often been twisted to mean that he believed that research is without bias or lacks application to ethical issues. By “value neutral,” Weber simply meant that the researcher should approach the topic “neutraly” and not prejudge or impose meanings or interpretations. One can study prisons and demonstrate their debilitating effects on inmates, but one cannot conclude from these effects that we ought to abolish prisons because of the “scientific fact” that it is more noble to be humane than cruel.

This does not mean that Weber felt that scientists had no role to play in formulating and implementing values. Weber's concept of an “ethic of responsibility” allowed him to argue that scientists could have an impact on important social issues in the way
they formulate topics, choose to analyze them, and apply the results. One could, for example, argue to abolish prisons by looking at the consequences of prison policies, conditions, and existence. If the findings clearly demonstrate their debilitating impact and ineffectiveness in meeting goals, research findings might develop alternative policies that could include abolition.

The lesson for critical ethnographers is profound, but not complicated: We let the data speak to us, we do not prejudge or impose our own preferred meanings, and we make sure that we do not say is when we mean ought. We are, however, fully free—Weber might say obligated—to select our topics and pursue lines of inquiry that raise “ought” questions. As scientists, we are simply forbidden to submit value judgments in place of facts or to leap to “ought” conclusions without a demonstrably cogent theoretical and empirical linkage. In short, we can think critically through reflexivity and by rethinking our work and its implications in iterative (i.e., repeated) versions of the research process, but we must always analyze empirically.

Variations on a Critical Theme

Although critical thinkers share a set of basic tenets and goals, their individual intellectual and ideological preferences branch out in several directions. This may seem confusing at first, but the confusion dissolves if we recognize that the critical label actually refers to a broad range of approaches, not all of which are compatible. One can utilize the perspective as political action, participatory research, applied policy research, or community organizing, or one can observe from the sidelines by critiquing and challenging culture and its symbols.

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The categories below are hardly exhaustive (see Hammersley, 1991; Van Maanen, 1988, pp. 127–130), and they are not intended to provide clear lines of demarcation between critical and noncritical studies. The goal is simply to identify a few of the more common approaches within fairly cohesive bodies of literature that challenge conventional ideas or social arrangements. Although sometimes overlapping and not
always distinct, they can be placed on an analytic continuum ranging from “armchair reflection” to direct political action.

POSTMODERNIST ETHNOGRAPHY

Postmodernism, a form of cultural critique that emphasizes the arbitrary nature of cultural signs and their codes, has implicit and explicit relevance for ethnographers (Cullum-Swan & Manning, 1992, p. 3). Postmodernists tend to be “armchair radicals” in that their critiques focus on changing ways of thinking rather than calling for action based on these changes. Postmodernism is a reaction against “cultural modernity” and is a “destruction” of the constraints of the present “maximum security society” (G. Marx, 1988) that attempts to gain control of an alternative future.

Postmodernism's starting point is a critique of the Enlightenment as a failed rationalist project which has run its time but which continues to encumber contemporary thought with illusions of a rational route to knowledge, a faith in science and in progress. The radical core of postmodernism lies in its mission of shedding the illusions of the Enlightenment. (Hunt, 1991, p. 81)

Postmodernists claim that modernism is dead. Modernism's characteristics include (a) belief in the power of reason and the accumulation of scientific knowledge capable of contributing to theoretical understanding; (b) belief in the value of centralized control, technological enhancement, and mass communication; (c) adherence to established norms of testing validity claims; (d) acceptance of the Kantian view of the possibility of establishing universalistic value statements; and (e) belief in the possibility of progressive social change. In response, postmodernists offer an ironic interpretation of the dominance of a master technocratic or scientific language that intrudes into realms once considered private, the politics of techno-society, and the sanctity of established civil and state authority.
Postmodernism is characterized not so much by a single definition as by a number of interrelated characteristics (Harvey, 1989). Among the most prominent are dissent for dissent’s sake (Lyotard, 1988b), a stylistic promiscuity that mixes and matches metaphors and symbols to obtain contrasting meanings, and a playful parodying of standard meanings to show their irony (Featherstone, 1988, p. 203). Ironic meanings are alternatives to the literal meaning of a symbol or text that seem to convey a surprising or contradictory message. As a consequence, irony is a powerful wedge for splitting hidden meanings from the obvious ones. Postmodernist thought attempts to strip away the familiar social and perceptual coordinates that comfortably anchor our common sense meanings (Cullum-Swan & Manning, 1992, p. 2; Latimer, 1984, p. 121) and searches for new ways to make the unpresentable presentable by breaking down the barriers that keep the profane out of everyday life (Denzin, 1988, p. 471).

Deconstruction and Social Inquiry. Deconstruction derives from the prolific works of Jacques Derrida (1976, 1978, 1982), whose casual use of the term in a 1966 lecture (Kamuf, 1991, p. vii) named his project of separating the meaning of a text from the authority of its author. The approach became popular especially among literary critics in the 1970s, but only recently have social scientists begun to borrow and integrate the central ideas. Social deconstructionists invert hierarchies of power and authority and challenge the dominant features of social structure-as-text and the ways we study them. As a consequence, the field of study becomes a text of signs. The variable meanings, applications, and consequences of these signs within their specific context of cultural use become the analytic focal point.

Like postmodernists in general, ethnographers following the deconstructionist tradition are characterized by what Berman (1990, p. 4) in a related context calls “theoretical skepticism” toward language and other communicative symbols in which no meaning is fully fixed or exhaustively definable. For ethnographers, this leads to the goal of deciphering and overturning the master cultural narratives that convey subtexts of dominant meanings that lay beneath the primary ones.

If postmodernism is about anything it is about the materiality of language as a dynamic force in the ritual social transformation of an indeterminate range of human possibilities into the restricted moral economy of a given order of things in time. Does this make
any sense to you as a reader? Whether it does or doesn't, I assume, is a matter of language. Language that keeps us at a distance; or language that brings us together in a certain way, while exiling (at least for the moment) other ways of interpretively making sense of and/or being in relation to each other. (Pfohl, 1991, p. 10)

Pfohl’s (1990) ethnographic surrealism depicts a society that terrorizes but lacks a language to express the pain. Others offer a similar view in more conventional terms. Denzin (1988, 1990a, 1990b), for example, challenges the cultural images created by movies and other cultural media to decipher how the conservatism and violence of contemporary society are re-created symbolically. He prods his readers to look at the extraordinary in the mundane. The works of Manning (1986, 1988, 1989, 1991, in press-b) shift from analysis of T-shirt graphics to cultural violence and the ironic meaninglessness of the most meaningful of events — death — in order to illustrate how subtle forms of social oppression are reproduced. Seaton’s observations (1987) of prisoners’ tattoos lead to a self-interrogation in which she subverts the unity of a spectator’s perceptions and the objects perceived. Cobb and Rifkin (1991) deconstruct mediation proceedings in the legal realm and find that their supposed neutrality subtly reproduces power relations that hide behind the rhetoric of “neutral” discourse. Perhaps the most useful resource for postmodernist ethnography comes from the British journal Theory, Culture and Society, which consistently publishes postmodernist and other critical cultural studies that illustrate the diversity of the perspective.

The critical potential of postmodernism lies in its subversion of conventional ways of thinking and its ability to force reexamination of what we think is real. A postmodernist-influenced ethnography must confront the centrality of media-created realities and the influence of information technologies that “store, transform, and subtly shape life chances in the postmodern world, and the relativity of perspectives” (Manning, in press-a).

Ironically, postmodernism carries a potentially nihilistic message of distrust of Enlightenment belief in social progress and the possibility of establishing universal values, which are central to contemporary critical thinking (Habermas, 1984, 1987). But, as Manning (personal communication, 1991) has reminded me, the central ideas of postmodernism should be confronted as a question about the organizing precepts in
visualizing a society where neither industrial production nor nature constrain us as they once did. It is a vehicle for the projection of future fantasies, and its strength is in pointing out what we do not know.

PARTICIPATORY ETHNOGRAPHY

Argyris and Schon (1991, p. 85) argue that social scientists are faced with the dilemma of choosing between rigor or relevance. Guided by the commitment that the production of knowledge should be applied to problems in the research setting from which it comes, participant researchers opt for relevance and identify closely with the needs and concerns of their subjects, using diverse perspectives that attempt to reconcile action with inquiry. These include participatory action research, action research, and participatory research. Each of these positions begins from a similar premise: Social scientists should reduce barriers that separate the products of research from the research subjects. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, each of these perspectives possesses nuances that distinguish its tasks and goals from those of the others. They differ from each other primarily on the degree of participation by subjects in the research process itself (Karlsen, 1991, p. 143).

Participatory Action Research. Although not the originator of participatory action research (PAR), William Foote Whyte remains perhaps the best-known exemplar (Whyte, 1991). His study of Italian “corner boys” in Street Corner Society (Whyte, 1943) is notable not only for its political subtext, but for a substantial appendix reflecting on the biographical, ideological, and other baggage he brought into the field, as well as the impact of the subjects on Whyte himself.

In most conventional inquiry, researchers serve as experts in the design, implementation, and policy suggestions for research projects. PAR advocates, by contrast, proceed from the premise that “science is not achieved by distancing oneself from the world” and that when possible, researchers should defer to the input of the subjects in the belief that “it is possible to pursue both the truth and solutions to concrete problems simultaneously” (Whyte, Greenwood, & Lazes, 1991, p. 21).
Typical studies have focused on agricultural collectives, workplace relations, and employee-management relations in an attempt to define the needs of subordinates and others normally excluded from decision-making processes (Whyte, 1991). Because this variant rarely challenges existing power relations, but rather serves a mediating function between the powerful and the less powerful, it has been criticized by other critical scholars for ultimately perpetuating systems of control. If we view critical studies on a continuum rather than by some absolute standard of purity, however, PAR offers a way to redirect attention from those who wield power to those who bear its consequences.

**Action Research.** Action research (AR) differs from PAR in that researchers use their questions, puzzles, and findings to build descriptions and theories and then test them from within the research setting itself (Argyris & Schon, 1991, p. 86; Karlsen, 1991, p. 147). Outcomes are tested through “intervention experiments” in the field of study.

For example, in testing whether there is housing discrimination, couples with different racial and ethnic backgrounds but with similar incomes try to rent apartments. Action researchers compare how often dominant-group and minority couples are shown apartments in choice locations and whether the minority couple is shown apartments only in minority neighborhoods. (Rubin and Rubin, 1991, p. 168)

Action anthropologists (e.g., Schleiser, 1974; Tax, 1970) illustrate how engagement of researchers in Native American populations can be committed to the goals and interpretations of the host populations. Alinsky’s community-oriented research (1969) in Chicago in the 1940s provides a model for contemporary scholars seeking to integrate knowledge production with political empowerment. The recent work of Elden and Levin (1991) illustrates how they integrated problem solving with the goals of empowerment by a negotiation process that unified the subjects’ needs with the requirements of scientific rigor. In their study of merchant shipping, Walton and Gaffney (1991, p. 124) describe how each stage of their project to promote organizational change within the industry was shaped both by the subjects and by the actions that the research generated, and Levine’s study (1982) of the Love Canal pollution disaster also demonstrates the power of knowledge when applied to a community environmental crisis. Wagner and Cohen’s description (1991) of empowerment of the homeless...
following mobilization for more resources also illustrates the utility of critical scholarship coupled to social action.

Participatory Research. Participatory research (PR), developed especially by adult educators, is explicitly radical. If Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, p. 4) are correct in arguing that pedagogic authority is the power to sanctify cultural meanings, then PR's opposition to the primacy of the researcher in establishing and guiding the research agenda challenges what Collins (1979) has called “credentialing” (p. 202). Credentialing is the practice of officially certifying competence, and those so certified are given more power and influence in imposing their own preferred view of the order of things on others. By removing the criterion of credentials as a passkey into the realm of inquiry, participatory researchers aim to eliminate the “property of positions” (p. 203) that allows researchers in conventional research to monopolize knowledge production because of their status. PR proceeds from an attempt to generalize a process of research instead of its outcome.

Influenced especially by Friere's theory of radical education as a means of social change in Third World countries, participatory researchers follow his adage that oppression is domesticating, but through reflection and action the world can be transformed (Friere, 1972, p. 36). In the United States, this has commonly taken the form of organizing and “re-awakening the weakest sections of our society” (Tandon, 1981, p. 23) in economically or socially depressed urban areas in ways that empower through literacy while simultaneously producing research that stimulates political action (Castellanos, 1985; Dearruda, 1990; Heaney, 1983). Other examples of integrating research, research subjects, and direct action include Maguire's application (1987) of PR to feminism, Smith's studies (1990) of police raids on gay baths and the management of AIDS in Toronto, and Davenport's analysis (1990) of grass-roots training for educational activism in low-income Chicago neighborhoods. Street's study (1992) of Australian nurses is an excellent example of how critical ethnography integrates empirical analysis, theoretical conceptualization, and critical insights. With subtle irony, she illustrates how those charged with healing others employ shared meanings to create a culture in which the power/knowledge relationship renders them powerless, oppressed, and vulnerable.
These variants challenge normal science in several action-oriented ways. They subvert the dominant scientific practice of creating neutral and abstract knowledge to be used by those with the power to control it. By incorporating research subjects to varying degrees as near equals in the projects, knowledge is transformed into a collective enterprise in which its production and use are to be shared by those who are its focus. Researchers also become active in confronting explicit problems that affect the lives of the subjects—as defined by the subjects—rather than remain passive recipients of “truth” that will be used to formulate policies by and in the interests of those external to the setting. Despite variation in the emphasis, each approach assumes the subjects are competent to shape methodological, theoretical, and practical outcomes.

Finally, each variant elicits a “sociological imagination” among research subjects by stimulating at the practical level theoretical understandings about conditions of existence and what can be done to change them. Practitioners take seriously C. Wright Mills's dictum (1967, pp. 530, 674; 1970, pp. 11–13) to transform “private troubles,” those problems that affect individuals, into “public issues,” those larger societal processes that contribute to the troubles. Sharing the power of knowledge production with subjects subverts the normal practice of knowledge and policy development as being the primary domain of researchers and policymakers.

Marxian-Oriented Approaches

The term Marxian-oriented research refers to studies that focus on the cultural underpinnings of concepts that include class, ideology, or the “capitalist state.” Marxian approaches to critical cultural analysis can be traced to the anthropological works of Marx’s contemporary, Lewis Henry Morgan, who traced the transformation of societies from one form of social system into another. His observations influenced Marx and especially Engels in their analysis of social change (Block, 1983, pp. 9–10). Marx and Engels used cultural anthropology to describe or confirm the operative principles they saw in the capitalist process and to search for examples of noncapitalist societies against which to compare their own social systems (Block, 1983, p. 15).

Marxian anthropologists recognize that cultural knowledge is the product of a combination of different social processes, including practical activity, ideology, rituals,
and myths, and that these cannot be understood outside of the experience of political domination (Block, 1989, p. viii). The emphasis on structural factors that shape culture, however, has tended to shift the research focus of Marxian practitioners away from immersion within a particular group to one that looks through a lens providing a more distant view, such as critical theorists’ focus on mass culture, neo-Marxists’ analyses of the commodification of culture, or the relationship between social control and “deviant” cultures.

[p. 30 ↓]

Calls for a radical anthropology (Hymes, 1974) have not led to a ground-swell response, but there remain sufficient impressive examples to illustrate how Marxian cultural studies might proceed (Nelson & Grossberg, 1988). Among these are Block’s studies (1989) of myths and rituals in establishing power relations, Challiand’s (1969) study of ideology embedded in North Vietnamese peasant culture that contributed to the peasants’ resistance against foreign domination and imperialism, and the corpus of works by Godelier (e.g., 1972, 1978) in which he examines the class-based relationship between the material forces of a culture and the representations, ideas, and symbolic patterns necessary for any kind of activity to occur. Others are more subtle in nature, such as Russell’s examination (1989) of the transformations of power and ritual resulting from economic changes in an Asian society, or Littlefield’s description (1989) of the closing of a Native American school when it no longer met the needs of a changing capitalist economy.

Some of the better Marxian studies of culture are not usually recognized as ethnographies, in part because the subject matter tends to focus on social structure. These studies tend to focus on such topics as the role of the state in culture formation, ideology as a means of legitimizing forms of control, or class and class structure in creating or reinforcing stratification systems. Some of the better examples include Thompson’s study (1975) of the shaping of early eighteenth-century English law in the dialectical clash between class and culture, Genovese’s (1976) analysis of slave culture as a form of resistance and accommodation, and Jones’s description (1976) of class structure and culture in Victorian England. In conceptualizing a critical practice for ethnography, Ganguly (1990) suggests that conventional ethnographic studies of colonialism recreate the discourse of racial and cultural differences in ways that

[p. 31 ↓]

Typical criminological studies focus on law or the legal process, including McBarnet's portrayal (1981) of how the conviction process and the ideology of law mediate internal contradictions and Balbus’s description (1977) of how the legal processing of participants arrested in inner-city disturbances in the 1960s reflected the tension between the power of the state and the relative autonomy of law in maintaining cultural order. Diamond's study (1971) indicates that an expanded legal apparatus reflects the weakening of cultural bonds as society is progressively controlled by signals contained in law's symbolic meanings. Others, influenced by the Frankfurt school, attempt to combine existentialism and Marx's early writings as a way to illustrate how social activity such as law can be used to empower and give meaning to social existence (Milovanovic & Thomas, 1989).

Marxian ethnographies remain underrepresented in ethnographic literature, perhaps because the nature of Marxian theory makes an explicitly “Marxist” ethnography difficult. The basic structural concepts, such as the labor theory of value, the dynamics of class struggle, and the law of tendential decline of profit, are not readily amenable to close cultural observation. Some researchers have attempted this with success, as in Willis’s study (1981) of the relationship between education and class, Bourdieu's use of Marxian concepts as a metaphor for the power of language, Andersen's study (1981) of class consciousness among professional women, Edin's analysis (1991) of contradictions in the welfare state and its clients, or Leal and Oliven’s critique (1988) of the class basis of Brazilian soap operas. As these and other cultural analysts have shown, the heuristic value of a Marxian-oriented perspective for examining historical transformations,
ideology, and the dialectic of cultural formation indicate that “revisionist” scholars who rework Marx's ideas and integrate them into other paradigms can produce exciting scholarship.

Conclusion

Critical researchers range on a continuum from those who adopt a few of its characteristics to those who avowedly attempt to incorporate all of them. Some critical approaches, such as participatory action research or action research, seek dramatic reforms without fundamental structural changes. Others, such as participatory research or Marxism, are avowedly radical to the extent that they advocate replacement of existing forms of social organization.

Even the most modest of these approaches contains a subversive element, because they advocate changes that are not merely cosmetic, but possess the potential for “nonreformist reforms” (Gortz, 1968) that lead to fundamental social change through seemingly modest increments. We can choose to challenge the symbolic edifice on which culture is based, as postmodernists do by critiquing the power of language as a form of social control, or we can take a more direct approach and define and tackle community problems (Rubin, 1987, pp. 40–42; Rubin & Rubin, 1991, pp. 165–170; Smith, 1990).

As action, critical ethnography can be implemented in a variety of ways. First, and most modest, changes in cognition resulting from new ways of thinking are an important step toward recognizing alternatives. Second, we should never underestimate the power of interaction with others as a form of action, because new ways of thinking can be contagious. Third, interaction can lead to networking, in which we unite with others for common goals, including conferences, writing projects, and action-oriented groups. Fourth, those who teach have the opportunity to integrate critical thinking into their curriculum—not to impose a “correct” line of thinking, but to help students examine the conditions of their existence from their own perspective, whatever it might be. Finally,
critical thinking can contribute to community organizing, legislative reform, or policy formation.

For some scholars, critical ethnography must remain a Marxist ideology to justify the label *critical*. For others, a broader socialist or humanist ethos drives research. Despite differences, these basic approaches are unified by a style of thinking and writing that links the elements of cultural description to social organization, social structure, or action. We must always remember, however, that any demand for ideological unity subverts the central project of critique. Insistence on “correct” political thinking dissolves critique into a narrow mode of inquiry that limits thought and diminishes possibilities for theory and action.

NOTES

1. A fourth variant, action science, is not sufficiently distinguishable from action research to be considered separately here. A summary of the perspective can be found in Whyte (1991, p. 97) and Argyris and Schon (1991, p. 87).

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