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HERMENEUTICS AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANCHORING OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses elements that allow us to establish a relationship between anthropological practice and hermeneutics. We start from the classics of the hermeneutical theory to establish relevant criteria that permits us to analyze the cultural reality. We break with the static paradigms which do not allow a creative stance in considering ethnographic data. We build a hermeneutical perspective from the anthropological work and then define its scope from the ethnographic method. We conclude that, from a new approach, anthropology should leave empiricist areas of positivism to reach the configuration of cultural contexts.

Key words

Ethnographic method - Hermeneutics - Episteme - Culture

LA HERMENÉUTICA COMO ANCLAJE EPISTÉMICO DEL MÉTODO ETNOGRÁFICO

RESUMEN

En este trabajo se abordan elementos que permiten establecer una relación entre la práctica antropológica y la hermenéutica. Partimos desde los clásicos de la teoría hermenéutica para constituir unos criterios relevantes que permitan analizar la realidad cultural. Rompemos con los paradigmas estáticos que no permiten una postura creativa a la hora de examinar los datos etnográficos. Construimos una perspectiva hermenéutica desde el quehacer antropológico, para luego definir su campo de acción a partir del método etnográfico. Concluimos, que desde un nuevo enfoque la antropología debe salir de los ámbitos empirista del positivismo para lograr una configuración de los contextos culturales.

Palabras clave

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Método etnográfico – Hermenéutica – Episteme – Cultura

1. INTRODUCTION

Anthropology today is redefining its theoretical postulates from innovative epistemic positions. The following piece of research is an analytical perspective of anthropology, taking hermeneutics as sustenance. In this sense, hermeneutics is to anthropology the epistemic anchoring needed to be renewed. We start from the traditional concepts of hermeneutics to gradually get into more contemporary definitions and analyses that will give us lights to reinterpret the theoretical framework.

To reconstitute, with theoretical criteria that exceed the descriptive view of traditional anthropology, epistemology must go through a serious review and a rigorous re-setout, ie, the hermeneutical rescue as scientific essence. With this, we try to overcome the rigidity and unilateralism by refuting the conception of objectivity of positivism and external action to individuals. Therefore we propose the recovery of the social context, its meanings, representations and multiple determinations.

2. OBJETIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The essence of the anthropological analysis is the subject and subjectivity as creators and builders of reality. With the hermeneutical rescue for anthropology, we appropriate the comprehensive / interpretative perspective to analyze data, serving multiple subjectivities present in the social context to thereby visualize the various aspects of observed everydayness. Hermeneutics thus takes back its role in anthropology as the epistemic foundation. Thus, from the methodical point of view, the interpretation of reality and the subjective meanings of social action turn into part of the ethnographic fact of analysis. With this new approach to ethnography, interpretation in the study of cultural phenomena acquires relevance. Ethnography cannot stay in a reductionistic / descriptive perspective of culture, it is not only data accumulation. On the contrary, ethnography unfolds into a series of operations to go to the field and then theoretically build a written text. Using hermeneutics in ethnography allows us to understand / interpret the cultural processes, which would be impossible with a mere social description. This paper is divided into two parts. The first one deals with everything related to hermeneutics and its entanglement with anthropology and the second is concerned with the definition of ethnography as a method that unfolds from hermeneutics.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Hermeneutics as epistemic basis of anthropology

For this piece of research, it is important to address reality from the interpretive paradigm rooted in hermeneutics that, in any case, is considered by all theoreticians to be a different model of positivism. Although anthropology at the beginning was

solidly positivist, we believe that it has succeeded in overcoming the obstacles bounding it to this paradigm to move in different directions, providing us with a multiple theoretical stock that allows us to carry out the undertaking of diversity. Hermeneutics is to social sciences an entire theoretical / methodical opening that allows understanding (Verstehen) of social phenomena in the light of concrete and empirical elements.

The concept of hermeneutics comes from the Greek *hermeneúcin*, meaning the "art of interpretation". The earliest forms of application of hermeneutics were carried out by the Greeks through philology, that is, the interpretation and understanding of texts (Martinez, 2004: 102-103). From the viewpoint of Christian theology, hermeneutics is used as a way to interpret the Bible to penetrate the interstices of the surface of the text and thus reveal its meaning. From understanding of the Bible, hermeneutics is taken by the legal science to understand given texts and then interpret the meaning of the legal foundation, although it is subsequently transformed into dogmatic (Gutiérrez, 1986: 6-7)

It is with Schleiermacher Friedrich (1768-1834) that hermeneutics has a philosophical sense since, to him, the task of hermeneutics was "to understand speech as good as the author, and then better than him." He tried to present a coherent theory of the process of interpreting texts. He is therefore considered the father of modern hermeneutics (Gutiérrez, 1986: 13 and 14).

Schleiermacher proposes a circular system known as the "hermeneutic circle", which was intended to be universal. Each interpreter needs to enter the social dimension and the individual dimension of the author to understand. To the extent that the readers are identified with the author and put themselves in the author's place, the better interpretation will be (Martinez, 2004: 103-104).

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) began the study of hermeneutics inspired by the works of Schleiermacher. Both are part of the German Romantic movement. Dilthey can be considered an empiricist. The hermeneutical school inspired by the German romanticism always put much emphasis on the fact that the interpreter can use his understanding and penetrating capacity in combination with the cultural and historical context of the text addressed in order to obtain the original sense of the text. Wilhelm Dilthey never stopped aspiring to the possibility of objective and universally valid interpretation of texts. Dilthey applied the name that Friedrich Schleiermacher had given to the process of hermeneutical research he had founded and also called that process hermeneutic circle. This method was considered by Dilthey to be crucial to provide the necessary foundation to "*Geisteswissenschaften*", "sciences of the spirit". The process being circular refers to the interdependence (circular and not immediate) of meaning between the whole and its parts. Of course, Dilthey was one step ahead of Schleiermacher as he conceived an autonomous epistemology to hermeneutics; also, he conceived hermeneutics as the study beyond written texts, that is, social life itself and the multiple meanings emerging from it. Perhaps this view is somewhat close to anthropological work. Max Weber (1864-1920), like Durkheim, tries by all means to provide Social Sciences with a scientific status. To him, this seat is established by understanding social systems through its heuristic tool that he called ideal models. This is what Weber (2006) states about understanding:

Like any happening, the ("external" or "internal") human behavior shows links and regularities. However, one thing is proper only to human culture, at least in the full sense: the course of regularities and connections is interpretable *via understanding*. "Understanding" of human behavior obtained through interpretation contains primarily a specific qualitative "evidence" of a singular dimension (p. 175).

His teachings open a methodical perspective that attacks passivity, objectivity and description of positivism akin to the naturalistic interpretation of what is social. Understanding as an element of primordial analysis can articulate the various empirical facts and see them in a different dimension, that is, looking for a balance between interpretive procedures and experimental observations (Mardones, 1991: 251-254).

Weber's concern for the nature of capitalism led him to study the social and cultural institutions of the West and compare them with those in the East; in this regard, his contribution to anthropology is extensive since there is a whole bibliography concerning sociocultural aspects that cannot be overlooked by anthropologists. His studies of economics amalgamated with other elements such as religion lead him to methodically approach the definition of society as a social system, the only way to understand the cultural whole. But, regardless of his presenting a criterion of totality, he makes it very clear that it is impossible to cover the whole of reality and, therefore, the researcher must make use of abstractions of the phenomena and relationships to be studied. Accordingly, he refuses to generalize and universalize the propositions of sciences of culture because that would make them unimportant and obscure the meaningful and necessary differences. The above statement leads us into the world of contemporary anthropology, where diversity and differences of cultures is paramount in the studies of societal complexes. It is the crux of anthropology.

Weber established his studies based on ideal models, which is nothing more than the construction of categories, concepts that behave like characteristics and essential tendencies of the phenomena to be studied, ie, abstractions that allowed him to apprehend both facts and values. He did not mean under any circumstances to force data so that they adapted to the model, on the contrary, he says that the theoretical scheme should not be taken for reality. Understanding what is real is equivalent to interpretatively capturing the sense in relation to the constructed ideal type, only experience is which will determine whether the actual behavior is consistent with what has been built. These ideal types could lead to the reverie of prescribing social laws, with which Weber did not agree as he believed that you can only specify probabilities that can be confirmed by observation. (Weber, 2006: 175-221). Therefore, to Weber, the ideal types are his heuristic tool.

In Weber (2006), we can verify conscientious criticism to the principles of objectivity, there can only be a partial, limited and unilateral explanation of social processes, it is impossible to access the absolute and final truth. But this does not mean that there is only one parameter of subjectivity in research, since by understanding reality we are giving it its objective character. (Pp. 222-269).

Explaining sociology, Weber (1984) gives us his perspective of subjectivity:

The word "sociology" is used in many different ways. In the way adopted herein, sociology designates science, the object of which is to interpret the meaning of the social action and give, by its virtue, an explanation of how that action proceeds and the aspects it produces. In this definition, "action" is understood to be that human conduct that its own agent or agents understands as subjectively significant, and to the extent that is what it is (p. 11).

Weber's contribution to social sciences is evident, his eloquence and deep analysis makes him one of the most controversial and studied theoreticians of recent times. Regardless of all criticism that we may express, especially to his approach to the ideal types, the great prodigality of his thought and action is undeniable. Currently, there are still different positions, this paper will assume hermeneutics as that philosophical trend that, sinking its roots in Husserl's phenomenology and Nietzsche's vitalism, arises in the middle of the 20th century, its greatest exponents being the German Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), and the French Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005). They all take a certain stance on the problem of truth and being, the former being defined as the fruit of an interpretation, and the being (world and man) as a large textual unfinished work that behaves similarly to the written language.

Hans Gadamer, at the epistemological level, introduces a number of elements leading to the study of what is social. His basic approach revolves around language as social understanding. As a continuator of the philosophical tradition of Hegel and **Heidegger**, he retrieves the best of both to propose his theory of interpretation of texts (Aguilar, 1992: 127).

According to Gadamer, language is the means to reach understanding, which does not designate it as a method but as an art. This leads us to think that the dialogic or dialogical relations within societies are the only way to access understanding and interpretation of them. There is also a concatenation with the fact that a process is set to search for agreement or consensus. Therefore, understanding to him is conceived as the fundamental structure of human existence and not as a method of human sciences, as does Weber, the difference between these conceptions is that one of them focuses on philosophy and the other on sociology, in both cases the subjective and significant aspect of human action is considered. In Gadamer, it is present as he considered that, only by acknowledging what we put from our ideology in interpreting, we can recognize otherness and face the other. This is related to tradition, as all our preconceptions or opinions acquire historicity as a result of the tradition we have inherited (Aguilar, 1992: 134). Getting rid of our prejudices, an essential part of knowledge, would make us face an alleged objectivity that would bias the understanding of otherness as an object / subject of research, this objective criterion of understanding research would close the way leading to consensus between the dialoguing parties because we would not see its own subjective burden. The dialogic relationship requires the other to assert his views and that the anthropologist collects this opinion, but the conversation establishes that the interlocutor knows how to ask, since it is the only way to understand and interpret the process because, otherwise, it would only be a reproduction of the experiences of the other and the denial of question - answer dialectics (Aguilar, 1992: 150). Although we might think that Gadamer's dialectics is mechanistic - positivistic due to its cause

and effect relationship represented by the question and answer pair, it is important for the simple reason that dialogue is given a dynamic perspective.

Gadamer's theory provides vital elements to anthropology, precisely because of the dialogic relationship with society, which is broadly the epistemic object: the identity - otherness relationship that is key driver of contemporary anthropology. That dialoguing participation of the anthropologist with the different societal complexes is what provides this science with the material needed for its studies and findings on the socialized human being.

In Gadamer, dialogue is the way to understand and interpret, a very commendable view in the methodical work of social sciences, but in society there are other processes that are not intelligible through language; therefore, one should go beyond the mere dialogic resource of understanding - interpretation. However, rather than a defined movement, contemporary hermeneutics is a general "atmosphere" soaking large and varied fields of thought, permeating heterogeneous **authors like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Otto Apely Richard Rorty.**

To anthropology, it is an epistemic approach that is at the heart of the ethnographic practice, as it is clear that, in the anthropological endeavor, understanding/interpretation of cultural contexts is essential.

For anthropology not to immerse itself in a snobbish, accommodating and schizophrenic ecstasy, it goes through a serious review and a rigorous re/formulation of its epistemology, ie the hermeneutic rescue as the scientific essence. This episteme tries to overcome rigidity and unilateralism by refuting the conception or of objectivity as an external relation to individuals and it sets out the recovery of social context, its meanings, representations and multiple determinations. We vindicate the subject and subjectivity as creators and builders of reality. We analyze data from a comprehensive / interpretative perspective addressing the multiple subjectivities present in the social context to thereby integrate into their world of life: desires, expectations, interests. As contextualization is key to understand the significance of the observed facts. Thus, hermeneutics becomes an episteme of anthropology, since interpreting the subjective meaning of the social action allows us to describe such actions not only as a mental process but as a particular social practice, ie contextualized actions, since social reality is not simply something held only by the strength of the interpretations of individuals. That is why interpretation is central to ethnography in the study and description of cultural phenomena.

To Paul Rabinow (1992), hermeneutics in anthropology is "understanding me by making a detour to understand the other" (p.26). According to this statement, we can say that interpretation is always done from sameness to perceive the essence of the difference through this detour about which Rabinow speaks, which is just to test our own image against an otherness, ie , to test the "cultural I".

3.1 The methodical operationalization

Like all social sciences, anthropology approaches its subject of research by a method that helps it to understand the social phenomenon that is analyzed. In this case, we started from ethnography as a first fundamental level of anthropological research. To

Marcus and Fischer (2000) "Ethnography is a research process in which the anthropologist closely monitors by observing, recording and participating in the daily life of another culture, an experience labeled as the fieldwork method, and then he write reports about that culture, emphasizing the detailed description" (p. 43). But this method should be more than a mere apprehension of data allowing us to make an accurate and objective description of a society in the style of Malinowskian positivistic functionalism. On the contrary, it is complemented with theories and techniques that the researcher previously handles and, when approaching another culture as an observer, he redefines and updates. (Alarcon, 2007). Indeed, as suggested by Rise and Colley "The researcher must constantly question his own a priori and place himself in a learning situation" (2004: 20).

It is for this reason that ethnography as a method goes beyond the mere collection of data. Ethnography should be a research perspective with a set of operations to go to the field and then theoretically build a written text.

In this perspective, the anthropologist carries out his fieldwork in which he gathers information, takes different forms of observation (participant, militant, omniscient interaction, etc.) and establishes a dialogue with the other. When expressing dialogue, we go beyond the barriers of difference and stand next to the society under study in an intersubjective relationship. This does not mean that we have to take the vision and culture of the other –the wish of many researchers- leaving ours behind as a costume used and thrown away when desired. (Alarcon, 2007).

Geertz (1996) considers that the role of ethnographic studies should be a dense description in a process of interpretation and re-interpretation that is defined in dialogue with the other. Stephen Tyler (1998), referring to postmodern ethnography, tells us that "it gives priority to dialogue and not a monologue, and emphasizes the cooperative and collaborative nature of the ethnographic situation in contrast to the ideology of the transcendental observer (p. 301). Consequently, the observer is not isolated from the phenomenon he researches, but he is part of it. Therefore, fieldwork is more than a set of techniques "It is a methodological situation and also a process in itself, a sequence of actions, behaviors and events, not all controlled by the researcher ..." (Velazco and Diaz Rada, 2006: 18).

Therefore, to the ethnographer, his primary material is the empirical data and the way to analyze it is the interpretation, and the results of a piece of research respond to "what the ethnographer selected from what he understood, from what their informants told him, from what they understood "(Sperber 1991: 115). If so, the ethnographer's style focuses on what Sperber (1991) called indirect speech. While it is determined by the original statement of the informant, it is not a paraphrase but rather a summary. This dynamics leads to clear discursive relativism, as each ethnographer would condense or expand, according to his interpretation, what he saw or what the informant said.

As Sperber says (1991) "Of course, ethnographers cannot just cite and describe. In most cases they must interpret, that is, add to the various native versions constituting a cultural representation, an atypical or, what is the same, an exaggeratedly atypical, exogenous version, a thus distorted version that intelligible and relevant to its readers "(p. 126).

Accordingly, to Sperber (1991), it would be fairer if the ethnographer would rethink a linguistic turn and, instead of saying that he works with the interpretation of a fact,

say that he will interpret the representation of that fact. Sperber (1991) tells us that the ethnographer emerges is in their fieldwork, although he draws on previous techniques and experiences, each studied community poses a challenge to develop techniques able to interpret the representations involved, to do so, the work of intuitive understanding is vital.

The report of the fieldwork is steeped in conjectures, inferences from a variety of often ambivalent and complex behaviors, inferences that, though most of the time are made by the ethnographer, are sometimes made by informants. Thus, the most factual of reports fails to be more than a set of statements with which the ethnographer tries to express what he understood, what his informants told him from what they understood, what seemed relevant to the ethnographer. The rationale for using interpretation in Ethnography rests, on the one hand, on the fact that it allows the ethnographer to convey *his understanding* of a culture and, on the other hand, on the fact that everything that can be achieved through interpretation cannot be achieved through a purely descriptive approach.

The world outside the researcher is built on the foundations of its own culture that take it in a specific direction. The real possibilities for the ethnographer to communicate the cultural experience of the native are reduced to the chances we have to communicate the rules of a game with the exclusive use of the rules of another game. The non-transfer of these rules well illustrates the incommensurability and incommunicability of cultures and their underlying logics. The ethnographer can only know through the representations that his culture allows him to make. With these figures, the ethnographer can only hope to communicate or show the sense that its object of study has to him. As Marc Auge states in reference to cultural analyses "The anthropologist does not translate, he transposes." (2006: 52). This way, reality is transformed into an anthropological object that is shown for discussion and comparison with other ethnographic studies.

After the dynamics of fieldwork, we must interpret the data obtained in this dialogue with the other, which in turn must be related to the previous theory and knowledge of the subject. This way, we can interpret written, spoken, acted texts and even other types of texts and thus understand the oral speeches of *Pütchipü*. With the understanding that a text can have multiple meanings (polysemy) or heteroglossia, interpretation should lead us to exceed the superficial sense to reach the deeper, even hidden meaning, also to find several senses when there seems to be only one. In the interpretive act, there is an account (oral in this case), an author (wayuu *Pütchipü*) and an interpreter (researcher). Therefore, we must take into account the author's intention *for the text belongs to him*. But, on the other hand, we must realize that the stories will not say exactly what the author meant, because his intentionality has been exceeded to meet the subjectivity of the researcher, that is, his reflexivity. In this perspective, the researcher's task is to make it say something else, this way, the final text includes the author's meaning and the interpreter's meaning; it is a dialectical relationship and not merely decoding the message. The output of the anthropologist is not a passive mirror of reality but active interpretations built on it. As stated by Rosana Guber (2001), we should move from the reflexivity of the researcher to that of natives and vice versa.

This is how the anthropologist interprets and describes a culture or certain aspects of it for readers who are not familiar with it. What is at stake in the text is the

relationship between theory and field, mediated by ethnographic data.

4. CONCLUSION

Reconstituting anthropology from the epistemic guidelines of hermeneutics revitalizes the ethnographic method and puts it at the service of understanding/interpretation of cultural phenomena. With this new approach, anthropology is subtracted from the empiricist areas of positivism to achieve a configuration of the cultural contexts that meets subjectivity, change and multilocal dynamics that are present there. This redefinition makes us further apart from the descriptions of traditional transcendental anthropology, as it places us in a perspective that takes both the subjective and the social practices of the communities we research.

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