

What does Fabian mean by coeval processes? Discuss how our own knowledge practices shape anthropological analysis?

Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other* (1983; see also Fabian 1991) embarked on a critique of anthropology and its practices, by analysing the history of the discipline and its methods through the lens of Time. In fact, it is time and how this is used, and how it influences anthropological practices, the main protagonist of the book. Fabian's central argument is that anthropology in making its object of study, place it in another space and another time, denying to it coevalness with the time of the anthropologist, and thus anthropology makes the object become Other. The essay will unfold what coeval means, and how anthropological practices shape analysis. Then it will show why is important to always remember us that every culture is changing, and so why is important not to deny coevalness to the Other. Lastly, I will propose a new kind of ethnographic writing (a 'best before end' ethnography) to address the problem of coevalness and how to do justice to cultural change.

To be coeval: meaning.

Anthropology, Fabian argues, was born under colonialist's legacy, principally in order to study those people which were disappearing and seen as relics of ancient times. In the mind of the first social evolutionists, as Tylor, to study a distant people, maybe still involved in hunter-gatherer activities, was a way to study not only another culture, but a possibility to infer answers related to our past. It was a way to see how our ancestors lived prior to the Neolithic revolution. Anthropology was denying coevalness to its object of study, and by doing this it was defining two separate and opposite categories, 'we' and 'the Other'. The 'Other' was made different from 'us' modern societies by placing them in another place, in another time, thus legitimising western superiority and placing us in a time characterised by progress and modernity. To deny coevalness means to put the other culture in an allochronic relationship to our culture, so that the former is seen as fixed and unchanging, argument which in the past provided a justification for colonial occupation. Of course, anthropology evolved, and new school of thoughts rose and fell, as well as new problems but one did not. The problem, or paradox, as Fabian highlights, is Time: anthropologists still use two different notion of time, which clash together. The first is coeval and intersubjective, and it is used when anthropologists are doing fieldwork, in fact, to interact and communicate with the culture studied you need to be in the same place, at the same time, otherwise, communication cannot happen. The second notion of time, instead, is allochronic and objective, and it is used by anthropologists when they are writing about others, thus they are transliterating the knowledge acquired through fieldwork (in a coeval process) into an allochronic discourse. Therefore, anthropologists when writing, steal time from their object of study, they put them in another dimension, and by doing so, they represent the other culture as static and unchanging. Coeval means to put both, the subject/anthropologist/ and the object/interlocutor, in the same time, and same place, so that communication can happen, as it is the case in fieldwork; and to recognise that both cultures are fluid and at the same level.

Practices which threat coevalness: Cultural relativism, taxonomy and ethnographic present.

Fabian defines also three anthropological practices, which in his opinion threat coevalness and reinforce a distinction between object of study and anthropologists. The three practices are: cultural relativism, taxonomy, and ethnographic present. The former because it bypasses the concept of coevalness and shared time; the second one because its main concern is classification, and time has no role in the process; the latter instead, because it cancels time by using a present tense.

Cultural relativism is criticised because it presupposes that different cultures have different notions of time, which do not allow reciprocal understanding. The critique, in Fabian's book, concerns the way in which cultures are described by cultural relativists, such as islands, each one with a different concept of time, and therefore without possibility to have a reciprocal understanding of the meaning of it. However, if that is the

case, communication, which implies a shared intersubjective time, should be impossible, and since it is not, because it always happens in fieldwork, such a relativistic view does not subsist.

The second critique is aimed at the taxonomic purposes of anthropology. Anthropology, especially in the past, in fact, was interested in the classification of cultures, and how they can be compared. The critique is moved, in particular, against Levi-Strauss and his binomial classificatory system, and his inability to explain changes in cultures. In fact, Levi-Strauss, classified cultures as being 'cold' or 'hot' ones. 'Cold' cultures were thought to be static in time, unchanging and stuck in the past, whether 'hot' cultures, namely western ones, were changing and always moving forward. However, in this way, 'cold' cultures were denied time and change.

The last threat to coevalness is the use of the ethnographic present in the work of many anthropologists. Of course, one can see this practice merely as a literary device to write and produce knowledge, but in Fabian's opinion such practice serves more than being a device. In fact, in his view, the anthropologist who use the present tense is placing the object of study, the Other, in a place without time, it denies their coevalness with the time of the readers. Moreover, anthropological writing, Fabian writes, has us (readers) as favourite interlocutors and recipients, and the other culture become a side-character, something which is missing from the scene, and it is not the main protagonist.

Why coevalness is important: The Samoan controversy

To consider another society to be coeval to one's own society is of fundamental importance, because it means that not only we treat the Other as a peer, but also, we are stating that cultures are not fixed entities, but they are fluid and in constant change, year after year. Being aware of coevalness, and therefore of the fluidity of culture, it is so important that this single notion could have helped avoid the Samoan controversy. In fact, Margaret Mead studied adolescence and growth in the Samoan society, publishing in 1928 the book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1943), one of her major ethnographies, which highlighted how culture influences biological processes of growth leading to different experiences of adolescence (e.g. growth and relative changes, due to cultural influences, are experienced differently by Samoan girls compared to American girls). However, the results exposed by Mead were later criticised in 1983 by Derek Freeman in his book *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The making and unmaking of an anthropological myth* (1983). Freeman heavily criticised Mead's work and, based on his findings, proposed a view of Samoan culture which was quite the opposite of Mead's description. However, the whole debate does not subsist, because Time and culture fluidity are not taken into account. Freeman in fact, denies coevalness of Samoan society by expecting to come up with the same results of Mead. Then as the results were different, he criticised Mead's approach. However, the two came up with different results because culture changed in that period of time, and it was not due to Mead having an erroneous method. Drawing from this example I would like to argue the need of an 'ethnographical expiry date', as food is no longer viable for human consumption after a certain date, so ethnographies should have a date after which the content and knowledge they carry should no longer be regarded as 'true' or 'useful'. In this way, we could emphasise the fluidity of culture and its continuous change, as well as recognise the coevalness of Other.

In conclusion, we have defined what coeval means: to share an intersubjective time where both subject and object are treated as peers. We have described how some anthropological practices (cultural relativism, taxonomy, and ethnographic present) can deny coevalness and which are the problem of these denials. Then I argued how and why is important to take into account coevalness (and therefore culture fluidity) by taking as an example the Samoan controversy, and how it could have been avoided. Lastly, I proposed the introduction of an 'ethnographical expiry date' as a device to avoid new controversies and to account for coevalness. Even if Fabian's criticisms might seem surpassed nowadays, I think they are still important, and we need to engage with them. It was not so long ago, on a flight, when I was asked to talk about my degree (anthropology). The interlocutor, as I discovered during the conversation, was still biased by past

representations of anthropology as a subject interested in past traditions and rituals, it was at that point that Fabian's arguments came to my mind, and I was able to change is perception of the subject.

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