

Anthropology of the Senses

Joanna Overing about social philosophy

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Joanna Overing in Wien, Jänner 2008 Bild: Norma Deseke

Joanna Overing (Professor Emeritus at St. Andrews University, Scotland) is a well known female anthropologist, famous not only for her pioneer fieldwork in Amazonian studies, but also for her highly intellectual theoretical writings on methodological approaches in cultural and social anthropology. During her stay in Vienna to teach a three week lecture course in January 2008, we met with her to talk about her specific interests in anthropology and some of her explorations in an anthropology of emotions, and its linkage with society, myth and cosmology.

We have heard you have studied in Vienna: When was that and what were your experiences back then?

This was in 1963. It was an experience that came by chance. My sister was married to a *Wiener* and they lived on Schottenring. I stayed with her that year because her husband was away in Germany, working, and she was pregnant, in need of company. I had been planning to go to Istanbul, but instead stayed here in Vienna – and had a wonderful time, in part because of the time I spent studying at the University of Vienna. At that time, I already had a BA and Master's degree (both in history) from my studies in the States. Thus the university here allowed me to join its Master's program in anthropology. I managed to follow one semester at the university, but found that my knowledge of the German language was simply insufficient to the task of properly following a university course taught through it! What I thoroughly enjoyed was the international climate of the student body at the University of Vienna at that time. I also enjoyed, though with trepidation, the strange lift that carried us to and fro the students' dining hall. A memorable experience.

Did you actually start anthropology in Vienna?

No, my first anthropology course was much earlier, in my first year at university, at Duke University in North Carolina, where I was able, as one of my options, to take Weston La Barre's year long course in anthropology. Weston La Barre (author of *The Peyote Cult*) was a very charismatic fellow, who thought it his duty to teach his students to become more worldly in their politics, and sophisticated in their cultural pursuits. His classes were large, and I, as the other students, adored him. The important point here is that La Barre considered successful anthropology to be only possible through minds exceedingly open to the world. Thus, for him, anthropology demanded a wealth of experience, both in academics and in personal life. It was because of La Barre's encouragement that my first 2 degrees were in history, not anthropology. At the end of my first year of undergraduate studies, I asked La Barre about the possibilities of majoring in anthropology. At that time, there were, in fact, very few undergraduate programs in anthropology in America, and La Barre was the only anthropologist teaching at Duke. His strong advice was to train in another field for my undergraduate work, and then later seek a PhD programme in anthropology. "Achieve knowledge in other fields – and then turn your attention to anthropology", he said. It was true that there were very few undergraduate courses in anthropology in America at that time, with anthropology being a field that was

usually taught only at the postgraduate level, and thus a discipline that was generally „transferred into“. Years later, when I began the process of applying for postgraduate studies in anthropology, Weston La Barre remembered me, and supported me through with (what I thought to be!) amazing references for my entry into what were at that time the most exciting anthropology programs in the U.S. I can truly say that Weston La Barre was a major influence in the development of my academic career.

What was the fascination for you in the beginning?

I don't know. I was reading what courses were available in the Humanities at Duke University, and, when I read the course contents of „anthropology“, I thought „that one was for me“! Anyway, there were probably many reasons for me to be so interested in the subject of different cultures: learning about different ways of doing things, and different ways of thinking. I grew up in North Carolina when the issue of its virtual apartheid and racist practices came to a political boil. When I was as a young teenager I was very involved in the anti-segregation campaigns. For instance, I and my like-minded friends („white“ by definition at that time) would organise ourselves to get on buses and sit as a „white block“ at the back of the bus, where all black people had been delegated (by law?) to sit. Our action meant that Blacks entering the bus were „forced“ to then sit in front, impinging thereby upon the supposedly „White only“ domain of the bus – like the „White only“ downstairs seats at an auditorium or cinema. „Blacks“ were always to sit „at the back“ – or on the balcony.

Also, perhaps ironically, America does value its „multi-ethnicity“. I was fascinated by the American Indians, and their cultures. I was also aware from an early age of their mistreatment during the settlement of the country. It nevertheless was, for me, a treat to visit them in the North Carolina mountains. I always was interested in the topic of how other people understood the world and lived.

How many years have you spent on the road doing fieldwork?

I wish I could have done more! My first fieldwork was in British Honduras, now Belize. This was back in about 1966, I guess. I was there only for about four months, collecting data for my Master's dissertation at Brandeis University, which would allow me then to enter its PhD programme. For my PhD thesis at Brandeis, my main fieldwork was in Venezuela, in the Orinoco

basin, among a people called Piaroa. My first fieldwork in the Orinoco was in 1968, all of 1968, when much was going on elsewhere in the world. While travelling along a tributary of the Orinoco, I learned of Robert Kennedy's death from the boatman's small radio. When settled in a village, the people with whom I lived kindly put a wire to reach up to the top of the trees in the deep jungle – so we could receive information on BBC World News as it was happening during that startling year. After completing my doctorate thesis (which I wrote while teaching at Vanderbilt University), I transferred to London in 1974, and got settled there at the London School of Economics, where I taught for 21 years. I went back to the Orinoco in 1977 for 6 more months of fieldwork among the people I worked with in 1968. Further trips became extremely difficult for various reasons: the distance, the cost – and most importantly, the politics. In 1976, I was the organizer of a very large symposium on Amazonia within the International Conference of Americanists meeting in Paris that year. There, one of the researchers of the Yanomami passed around a petition for us all to sign (my signature first, as I was the „Organizer“), because some Yanomami had killed a couple of gold miners. (Piaroa, the group where I worked, and Yanomami live next to each other.) The anthropologists who have been working with Yanomami, and neighbouring groups, were afraid that the government would punish the Yanomami who had taken action against what they themselves understood to be the violence of the gold miners. So the petition was for the government to take care in the handling of the matter. It is my understanding that because of this petition, many of us, including me, were blacklisted from further research in Venezuela, the government at that time being keen on development on a large scale. The possible reporting by foreign researchers (such as on dams being built on the tributaries of the Orinoco) to an international audience was not desired. At any rate, I wasn't allowed back for many years. Then, somewhere in the late 1990s, I received a letter from a kind Venezuelan researcher saying that a new political party was in power, and that I would be very welcomed back to continue my research – but by then I was discouraged about the enormity of the changes – and the harshness of the long exile. I was very thankful, that at that time, a young PhD student (Paul Oldham) then came to me, wanting my supervision for his fieldwork among the group with whom I had worked, Piaroa. It was he who then helped Piaroa establish the first national organisation, in Venezuela, of indigenous peoples. He, not I, had the talent for such work, and I was very grateful to him for this. I, myself, was planning to begin new fieldwork in Southern Brazil. But because I got a professorship in social anthropology at St. Andrews University, I found I needed to use my energy to further develop the department

and its PhD programme, and create a centre for Amerindian studies. I had a heavy load of research students to supervise, so didn't have time for new research. On the other hand, I still have extensive material from my fieldwork in 1968 and 1977 to continue to work through. It takes years to see, years to understand and then translate – on deeper levels at least – the ways of knowing and practicing of Amazonian peoples. It would have been wonderful, if I could have gone to visit them every year.

How did you acquire data, which methods did you use?

You talk to people. You listen to people. As you listen you learn how to ask more sensible questions. To learn demands intense concentration. You must go very slowly so that people have time to begin to trust and appreciate you – and entertained by you. You find that you have become their circus clown. (laughs). For instance, we Westerners are clumsy in the jungle. We do not know it.

How long does it take to really get in touch with people?

You can reach a certain level of information very quickly, simply by watching interaction, listening. But there are so many different levels of understanding to be achieved. So I can't give you a definite answer. Some researchers go in and make friends really quickly and don't learn so much because they aren't listening and watching well. Many people – certainly in the Amazon – prefer you being still so they can become accustomed to you slowly and see how much they can trust you. So there's a process of trust that goes on, you don't just go in and be jovial and slap people on the back.

Do you actually prefer to be in the field or to be in the process of reflection of what you have learned in your fieldwork?

Being in the field is probably one of the most amazing experiences that you can experience. You can be very lonely, you can be very happy. For me it was a highly intellectual project, first of all because Piaroa people are so intellectually inclined. Fieldwork was a reflective process. It was also the case that where I lived there was only one person who more-or-less knew a workable Spanish. All others were monolingual... As a result it was necessary to be dealing simultaneously with Piaroa, Spanish, and English, constantly juggling, translating between them. The biggest problem

for me, however, was that the area was one of the hottest places you can possibly imagine. I survived by splashing in the ice-cold tributary, and otherwise prayed for rain. Nevertheless, I loved being in the field with these people, who always treated me with care and kindness. It might have been more difficult if they had been in the process of coping with intensive change caused by government development and the entrepreneurial forces of globalism – all destructive of well-being, and working against indigenous knowledges and values. But Piaroa people were not so involved at the time of my fieldwork. When people *are* distraught, trying to cope with unwanted intrusions, they may not have the possibility, the room, for the processes of caring that they themselves feel should typify everyday life with others. I think fieldwork today is much trickier than it was in my experience. Life might even be more violent, as in, for instance, some communities in the North West coastal areas of the Americas, where their own favoured ways of living have been brutally dismantled. The researcher there must be „tough“, in a street-wise sort of way. Where I was, it was idyllic, but you had to be physically tough.

Is being in the field also a process of exploring your own feelings?

When you are looking at other peoples understanding of culture, you must simultaneously be looking at your own – when you are looking at other peoples understanding of equality, think about your own. In the process of learning what they are saying and understanding you are unfolding your own concepts and feelings. And as you are unfolding your own you are unfolding theirs. There is a constant dialogue between the two, even if a silent one. As Gadamer has told us, good understanding of others is best attained through a process of „conspicuous contrast“.

So do you think that anthropologists serve as “ambassadors” between cultures”, in their attempts to translate cultural knowledge?

To translate in a way that other peoples can understand other cultures is difficult, even for other anthropologists. I found that many colleagues were dismissive about daily living among Amazonian Indians. The fact that people like the Piaroa like peace and value tranquillity is often perceived (by academics) as a sign of political weakness – „these people must be scared of the more highly ‚developed‘ people (i.e. white folk) around them“. Amazonian Indians are much more self-centred and dignified than that. They love peace because they understand how dangerous it is to

live together even with others of their own kind. Living together is a dangerous process. Obviously, their reasoning about „correct sociality“ is different from that of Western scholars. They also take hallucinogens, but for different reasons from most Westerners (for knowledge, power and health, not fun). Shamans are highly controlled in their use of drugs, and use them to know about other worlds (than those known by the white man) that might dangerously interact with their own, creating havoc with the peaceful relationships necessary to healthy community living. The aim of the shaman using hallucinogens is to avert danger to the community. They are constantly averting anything that might endanger its tranquillity.

Thus to translate, you have to know who your audience is. From audience to audience, you need to change your focus of translation. That is the creative part of the job. It's one thing to talk to working class people in London about the Piaroa, and another to talk to colleagues, and yet another thing to move to the level of politics – or development. In fact, what you are doing with your translations is *always* political. Has political implications and repercussions. This is what researchers have to realize, the politics of what they are doing. They need to understand their own aims, and have the courage to follow them through – even within academic circles – for the sake of the peoples with whom they have been a guest.

Can you tell us something about your understanding of myths?

What I'm working on now is to understand Amazonian material better. What I have been trying to develop is a way of understanding Amazonian people in such a way that you don't just create a void: they don't have this, they don't have that. In fact, intellectually, psychologically, they can be very powerful. But how do you go about understanding that? You understand it by understanding the relation between everyday talk and their mythic talk. You have to learn the language of both, which for Piaroa people is one that is full of punning and play. And all is about the cosmos. Thus you have to understand a philosophy of life that includes continual cosmic happenings interfering with their proper ways of living together. To cope with such directions of thought, I found that we needed to develop an anthropology of aesthetics, of poetics, of performance, of the everyday. And an anthropology of the senses as well. Once you start looking at these concerns, such as the importance of the cosmic on everyday work, and the work of a creative use of language upon cosmic intrusions, you find much more exciting and powerful things going on. The senses are powerful, and it is interesting

to consider how knowledge and the senses go together – from their point of view. I think this is a very exciting field to explore, but it takes much work. Again, it is also a political task. It is also through such topics that you learn about Amazonian polity, where women and men are equally present. Just try to talk about the dignity of the political power of an Amazonian woman to a Western academic community. How do you translate the delicacy of the politics that views Amazonian woman to be just as political as the man. Having as much freedom, for instance. In much Amazonian oratory, this point is made clear. Indeed, women have their own oratory. A topic yet to be explored in full.

Can you tell us more about your interests in the field of emotions?

It's because Amazonian people themselves emphasise the importance of understanding the emotions, controlling them, using them well. Piaroa say that matters of the emotions must always be reflected upon. They stress the importance of intertwining of the senses with the intellect. Interesting enough, Piaroa understand that to rely too much upon the intellect, in itself, is too dangerous to both self and others with whom you live. Thus the intellect needs qualifying through a proper affective life. For Amazonian people the life of emotions are understood to be a very positive force in the creation of community. For Amazonian people, the life of emotions can be very positive (as in caring) – as well as having their own negative side (as in anger). However, if you look up laughter in an English dictionary, the definition provided is purely „negative“. In fact, in much of our sociological theory, the emotions are considered as a negative force, working against the construction of society. Amazonian people are instead trying to achieve a balance between „sense“ and „sensitivity“ (reason and the emotions), toward the end of achieving decent, and emotionally comfortable, social life.

Let's just go back to Lévi Strauss, who in the last chapter of his *Mythologique* argues, in a sparing section with Victor Turner. He makes the following distinction: „I'm interested in sense (reason and thought), while he's interested in sensibility (the emotions)“. Lévi-Strauss is interested in unconscious thought underlying myth, and therefore „pure mind“, while Turner, who is interested in the life of ritual, is concentrating on the „body“, and not „mind“. In Lévi-Strauss' way of understanding, you cannot scientifically deal with sensibilities and the body. You can, on the other hand, uncover through science the abstract structure of the mind (e.g. underlying the order of myths). Lévi-Strauss is insisting that if anthropology is to be a science, its subject must be

the life of the mind alone – and not include the body. This was a very nineteenth/early twentieth century way of understanding the distinction between mind and body – as separated entities. The body, and therefore the emotions, were considered without reason, as wild. However, how do we „know“ another’s mind, and their thoughts? If someone is telling you what they think, you still must wonder whether they really think what they say. Nevertheless, you usually can tell whether they really think something or not simply by watching *how* they say it – their body language, for instance. Of course there are probably underlying, unconscious structures of the mind. But you cannot understand a narration if it’s written down and just handed to you. You have to see it performed. Performance is crucial to meaning. To understand the humour and the tragedy delivered through narration, you have to see the humour and the tragedy performed, and that performance is part and parcel of that narration’s „meaning“. In other words, emotive factors can often direct meaning. You can’t get to the meaning unless you understand the intentionalities of the narrator as he enacts them through his/her performance of them – through rhyming and its rhythm, for instance. The importance of poetics to the meaning of the message has been taught us by Dell Hymes. John Leavitt, in his foundational article on anthropological understanding of the subject of the emotions, ends up by saying: “What’s important about the emotions is that they are both thought and felt.” “And that’s what makes them important – and very interesting.” (This is an also an Amerindian point of view!) Emotions can go either way: either the intellect is affecting the emo-

tions, or the emotions affecting the intellect. On the other hand, in the West we usually assume that the emotive is on the side of the child – or of the wild. Outside the West, and especially the world of Western academic talk, people think differently. For instance, Piaroa have their own philosophy about these issues, and train their children from five years on how to master their own thoughts. So that mastered thoughts can in turn be the master of emotions (thus becoming emotions carefully reflected upon). In Amazonia, and in many other parts of the world, you will find that emotions are being constantly talked about in daily discourse, because their expression is considered to be so important to the quality of to their life as lived within a community of relations. In other words, emotions are considered as a relational, and not ego-centred matter. This is what I write about. It is about indigenous social philosophy.

Do you have any last comments on anthropology itself or its future?

I think the discipline is wide open, it’s becoming much more interdisciplinary, which is good. You have much room to develop. Imagination is needed, well thought out imagination, and you need to be widely read broadly (the wisdom of Weston La Barre) to make things more interesting for yourselves and your audiences.

Thank you very much for the interview.