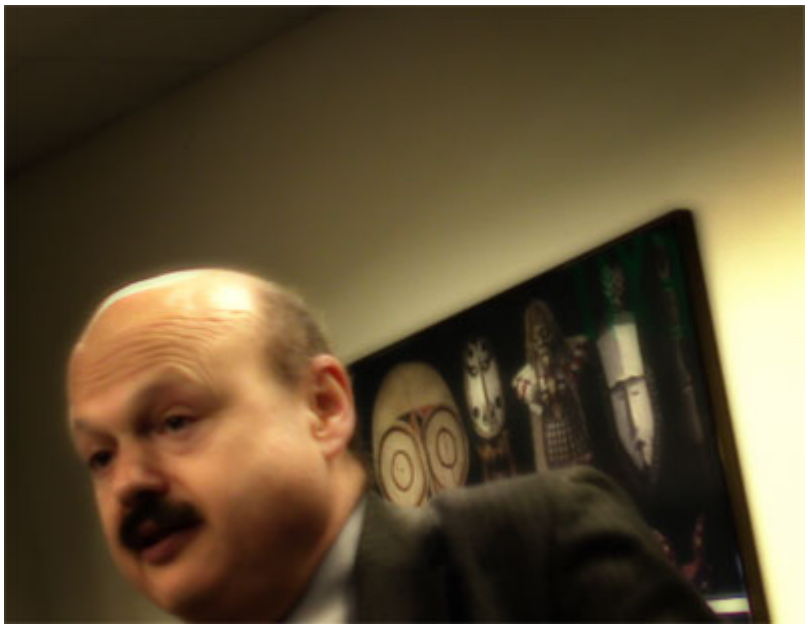
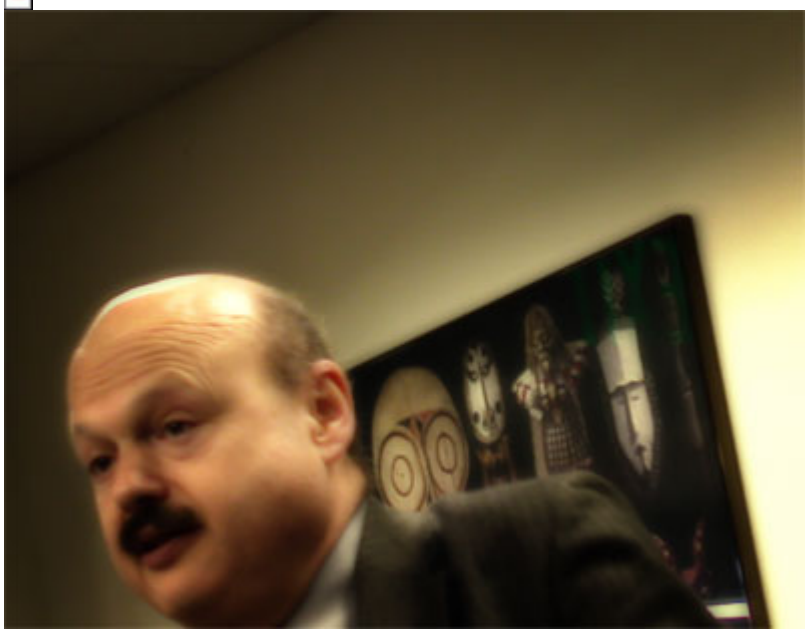
MICHAEL HERZFELD ON COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY



Comparing one society with another

Michael Herzfeld was talking today about ethnography, about the centrality of comparison. His latest work is to compare Greece with Italy with Thailand.



Michael Herzfeld at Stanford today

Many anthropologists have become anxious about the comparative method, because comparing one society with another with the aim of understanding each through general properties of society and culture has usually involved judgement – setting one over another – more and less advanced, whatever. The old opposition between a nomothetic and idiographic social science (anthropology versus history, for example) is between one that sets up laws (generalizations) and the other that writes about individual cases. The legal reference in the etymology is appropriate – judgement of truth, worth, and value is involved.

Michael's "Anthropology through the Looking Glass" had greatly interested me when I was writing my book about Classical Archaeology. My focus was on how Classical archaeologists of Graeco-Roman antiquity operated in their excavations, surveys, travels, writing. It explains a lot about the stories they tell. His book compared the discipline of anthropology with the modern Greek state. Both were nineteenth century inventions and both were designed to deal with the boundaries between the western European nation states and other cultures – primitive and other compared with the European imperial powers, antecedent in the case of classical Greece, awkward Balkan hybrid of east and west in the case of the newly reconstructed Greek state. For me this was a very interesting way of thinking – setting a discipline alongside a state – because they both dealt with borders. My own point – what a refreshing way to think about ancient Greece – not so much an historical reality as something classicists have invented to deal with their own border issues.

While anthropological comparison may involve the old colonial obsession with us and them, comparison is clearly also a necessity – an epistemological necessity. You can't just immerse yourself in another culture, efface yourself and get to know it in its own terms. Just as archaeologists cannot simply bury themselves in the past. There is always the anthropologist, having arrived from somewhere else, struggling to adapt and understand, translating – comparing. This was the essence of Michael's point about ethnography. The anthropologist was there and can report and claim insight and knowledge, at least ask to be heard.

Though he didn't put it this way, Michael was making an argument for the performative chracter of fieldwork – knowledge building through the body, communication, translation and expression of the anthropologist (see me just the other day on Mike Pearson – [Link]). The anthropologist owes it to the community being studied to stand up for them. Michael wants anthropologists to stand up for

the weak against the strong.

I would add that it is the act of witnessing that implies an ethical responsibility to the people the anthropologist gets to know. An obligation to keep the record straight, especially as anthropologists and archaeologists do work at the margins, on the borders, where things can be awkward and unclear, where identities are often in doubt, negotiations occur, where conspiracies are made.