

# Deconstructing and Reconstructing the Historical Present: Mediating Modern and Postmodern Sentiments

Liang Wei

**Abstract**—This paper discusses a variety of methodological issues of cultural studies by close reading two important works on postmodernism: James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* and Perry Anderson's *The Origins of Postmodernism*. The discussion, centered around reading both texts as intellectual history, concludes that the former is more methodological conscious and experimental than the latter. The paper attempts to shed some light on the methods and theories of cultural studies.

**Index Terms**—Modernism, postmodernism, intellectual history, cultural studies.

## I. INTRODUCTION: A METHODOLOGICAL REVIEW

Throughout the 1980s, original and provocative works associated with a postmodern perspective and addressing questions raised by postmodernism, appeared. Though different person may give a different list, most would no doubt include James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988) (*Predicament* hereafter) and Perry Anderson's *The Origins of Postmodernism* (1998) (*Origins* hereafter). Each one in itself provides an invaluable background picture of the so-called postmodern world lying behind the literary, artistic, and other cultural expressions of recent times.

This essay does not intend to be engaged in another round of the debates over postmodernism; rather, it is a reflection on questions of methodology. Methodology is intertwined with textual practices, which themselves constitute the social realities constructed and reconstructed through writing. Method and theory are inextricably linked: they are equally closely tied to modes of writing. In other words, methodological rigor and textual tact are entwined, complimentary and only analytically distinguishable. So I propose to merge two kinds of assessments of postmodern projects like *Predicament* and *Origins*, namely, a discussion of the variations of methods and an evaluation of the strengths and limitations of any particular texts in terms of logic and evidence. In my examination of methodological issues, rhetorical and textual devices will also be addressed as relevant.

## II. INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF POSTMODERNITY

Both *Origins* and *Predicament* can be read as histories. The former destabilizes the legacy that postmodernism is

beyond any theorizing and historicizing attempt, while the latter delegitimizes the notion of ethnography as transparent representations and ethnography as objective observers. What are some of the similar and different ways that both histories are constructed? To what extent do the methods employed by both authors predetermine these similarities and differences? These are the questions I will look into.

In terms of similarities, both authors do intellectual history. I will argue that what Anderson does is to analyze intellectual history temporally and spatially and Clifford's book can be read as performing intellectual history.

*Origins* is an engaging and inspiring history of postmodernity. When Anderson takes the challenge to map a history for largely underacknowledged and underanalyzed postmodernity, he chooses to work out an intellectual history. He states explicitly his purpose of this project in the "Forward"—"The principle aim of the essay is to offer a more historical account of the origins of the *idea* of postmodernity than is currently available.... A secondary purpose is to suggest, more tentatively, some of the conditions that may have released the postmodern—not as *idea*, but as *phenomenon*" [1]. The best way to deal with the trajectory of the idea, of course, is to do intellectual history, which is exactly what Anderson engages himself in.

Anderson's history of the idea of postmodernity is a temporal one in larger structure. It is also a spatial one on girded stages.

He charts the history of postmodernity into several stages, as suggested by the chapter titles: prodromes (3-14), crystallization (15-46), capture (47-77) and after-effects (78-137). In "Prodromes" and "Crystallization," he gathers up the strains of the idea of postmodernity just before Jameson rewrote the term of inquiry into the cultural turn to postmodernity. The remaining two chapters are devoted to an explication of Jameson's idea and further analysis of its influence. Beginning with a discussion of modernist intellectual life in the 1930s, the history moves through discussions of early thinkers such as Ihab Habib Hassan, Charles Jencks, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jurgen Habermas before reaching its central subject, the literary and aesthetic theories of Frederic Jameson.

Temporal sequence, therefore, is Anderson's "topical focus" in his exploration of postmodernity (P. vii). Derived from the temporal sequence, there is another important issue of periodization, as Anderson deals with in the "Timing" section of the last chapter. For instance, he offers a concrete date for periodizing the clear arrival of postmodernity, which is on 12 August 1982 when Jameson gave his speech at the Whitney on postmodernism. As Anderson sees it, with the fall of 1982, postmodernism arrived full-blown and thoroughly theorized. He does not see it as unviable to make

Manuscript received February 9, 2018; revised April 30, 2019.

Liang Wei is with the Chongqing Zhongxian Middle School, China (e-mail: 418078400@qq.com).

historical periods out of patchworks of cultural phenomena; on the contrary, he takes periodization as a useful maneuver. The historical continuity, as castigated by Clifford in *Predicament*, is not a problem to Anderson. With the help of periodization, Anderson endorses the implied concept of historical continuity. His all-too- neat timeline somehow evokes a sense of the passing of time. There is something coming before as well as following after postmodernism. Thus, Anderson is in a defensive posture when charged with questions like "How about modernism?" or "Is postmodernity the 'end of history'?" Furthermore, by locating the history of postmodernity in a clear-cut period of a finite time, Anderson grants himself legitimacy to form critical links with the postmodern present. The redeeming power as implied in this history of longer-run progress, however complicated and convoluted at the present, is what Anderson never doubts in his book. Thanks to his enduring commitment to historical materialism, Anderson in a direct and calm manner sticks to the historical prospect of restoration.

Anderson writes a history of postmodernity *about* the present as well as for the present. His "determination to be contemporary with both past and present" is partly embodied in his use of peer criticism [2]. His being the presiding genius at *New Left Review* over several decades provides him both resource and authority to do so. On the other hand, as a radical cultural critic, he follows the tradition of staying in certain discursive and political communities. An additional reason lies in the fact that *Origins* begins life as an introduction to *The Cultural Turn*, a book edited by Jameson.

A bizarre lineage of the rise of postmodernity is mapped out horizontally by the spatial diffusion of postmodernity. Anderson locates the origins of the postmodern in interwar Latin America, in the writing of Spanish poet Federico de Onís. Later it is brought to the English world by historian Arnold Toynbee, and then to the United States by the poet Charles Olson, who uses this notion to define his poetic project.

Anderson organizes the first half of his book in sections under hyphenated place-names, which altogether consist an impressive list: Lima-Madrid-London, Shaanxi-Angkor-Yucatan, New York-Harvard-Chicago, Athens-Cairo-Los Vegas, Montreal-Paris, Frankfurt-Munich. In a striking way, this list helps Anderson write up an enriched history of postmodernity while at the same time to some extent allows him to ward off some problems resulting from his linear way of history-writing.

A spatial history in Anderson's search for origins of postmodernity does not just appear by accident. First, it resonates with postcolonial arguments against Eurocentrism. From Anderson's insistence on locating the origin of the notion in Latin America, one can sense the author's tentativeness about the impact of the periphery on the center. Anderson also makes some other non-Western associations of the concept of postmodernity. He marks its traces in China, Mexico, Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, and Quebec. This global spatial history relativizes Euro-American modernity as well as postmodernity in a worldwide process and acknowledges the third-world people's participation in this process. Second, it has something to do with the

Andersonian sentiment of "olympian universalism," to borrow his own words attributed to the founders of historical materialism. His belief in universalism also explains why he remains intangibly extraterritorial to the United Kingdom and United States. Seen from his planetary view, the evolution of postmodernity is a transcontinental process.

Anderson's two purposes in this book are to trace the key changes in the idea of postmodernity, and, less extensively, to speculate on the structural and geopolitical conditions that have produced both the ideas and changes.

The method he deploys for this project is largely to synthesize an intellectual history and to extract a canon out of it. Omissions happen inevitably. Not to mention those who have been left out of this history (most notably: women), even Jameson himself, as the hero of the book, is in some way or another inadequately represented. For example, Anderson offers a series of succinct characterization of Jameson's five moves to capture postmodernism. When Anderson portrays Jameson in a linear progressive way and crystallizes his arguments, one wonders whether the writings of a postmodern theorist can be easily sorted out in that way. Conceptual tightness and clarity inform such an analysis. One may ask: are they the only things that should be expected? Are there any alternative ways of representation, of writing history?

The answer is perhaps that as readers, we sometimes ask too much. Aren't we in a fog about the odd and often unappetizing characteristics of postmodernity? Don't we need a helping hand to get out of it? If so, then why do we complain that it leads to "too clear a place"? What's weird is that we can't almost help asking more, especially this time, when having traveled from Lima all the way to Munich with Anderson's map at hand, we fail to arrive at *an* origin of postmodernity.

The problem comes from canon-formation. To be fair, Anderson tries hard to include more interesting places on his map. But the institutionalized practice of reading and writing itself pre-excludes some different voices and literatures. The moment a canonical text is presented, it has already denied authority to other writing practices because it organizes its own authority by means of the construction of others as screens upon which authorial desire is projected and displayed. What's fortunate for the reader, then, is to realize that a map is not just a map, but a rhetorical incentive to travel.

Has Anderson answered—"What are the origins of postmodernity"—by analyzing the intellectual history of the notion of postmodernity? Yes and no. It is helpful here to first distinguish postmodernism as a genre of refractory expression from postmodernity as "a specific historical period" [3]. So, it can be said that postmodernism is a symptom of postmodernity. Postmodernity in this sense is linked to the time-space compressions of late capitalism, which informs large-scale changes in Western society and culture. By choosing the subject of postmodernity rather than postmodernism, Anderson has already got the position of doing "extrinsic" (broadly political) instead of "intrinsic" (theoretical) history [2].

Literary-critical discussions of postmodernism may turn to be trivial, but the multidisciplinary assessment by

Anderson is quite the opposite. He pays close attention to poetry and to the progressive legacy of Charles Olson and the Black Mountain group of the 1940s. His treatment of these earlier references to the postmodern is more concerned with historical sociology than cultural studies. He does trace the key changes in the idea of postmodernity; but his second purpose of speculating about the conditions that have released these ideas and changes is not quite achieved. Even though he uses some interdisciplinary methods, he fails to document numerous significant and startling links between postmodern cultural expressions and structural developments in global politics, society, and economics (as Jameson does). His radical antiempiricism renders him ignoring detailed documentation of experiences in the living present, which is much needed for a history of postmodernity as a *phenomenon*. Of course, there are different meanings of postmodernity across disciplines. While Anderson takes up this job of building a canon of postmodernity, he has already put an emphasis on the critical assessment of a number of leading figures in contemporary intellectual life, who are in different ways thinkers at the intersection of history and politics. In its entirety, Anderson's book is a totalizing historical reconstruction of the last few decades of intellectual endeavors on postmodernity. Postmodernism is everywhere on display: in architecture and design, in film and music, in art and fiction, in poetry and literary criticism, in economics and politics. Anderson clearly knows that all theories of history are in one way or another falsified if subjected to empirical (dis)confirmation. So he neither conducts an intertheoretical comparison nor presents empirical substantiation. With this deliberately methodological choice, Anderson establishes his authority as an eminent historian, which in effect leaves very little room for his readers to arbitrate his claims. Full pictures of the postmodern condition need detailed documentation of ethnographic work and quantitative surveys of sociological method. To some extent, his choice of methodologies in intellectual history circumscribes the kind of history he can finally work out.

In the preface of *A Zone of Engagement*, a collection of his essays on intellectual life, Anderson launches a tirade against the following methodologies in intellectual history,

They are centered on individual authors... whose works they aim to reconstruct, so far as possible, as an intellectual unity, situated within the intellectual and political currents of their time. They assume neither automatic coherence nor inherent dispersion in the writing of their subjects. Rather they try to locate specific contradictions of argument where these occur, generally treating them not as random lapses but as symptomatic points of tension, either within the body of thought itself, or with the evidence beyond it [1].

### III. METHODOLOGICAL EXPERIMENT OF WRITING CULTURE

A pastiche of fragments, genres, images and voices is what James Clifford uses in his *Predicament*. The postmodern ideology of anti-paradigms characterizes this book.

Clifford's hyperconsciousness of being paradigm-breaking explains why *Predicament* is such a highly

methodologically conscious text. While watching the "expert" debates between anthropologists and historians in the courtroom of *Mashpee v. New Seabury et al.* land-claim trial, Clifford realizes that "indeed the trial can be seen as a struggle between history and anthropology" [4]. As he keeps doing the job of participant observation, he grows a dissatisfaction with both: "Interpretive and quantitative approaches to the study of society did battle in the courtroom, and neither came out looking rigorous" [4]. The traditional disciplines of both history and anthropology, however, are by no means a simple matter of lacking rigor. In his "Introduction: The Pure Products Go Crazy," written some ten years after the trial, Clifford states plainly his skepticism of "a unified version of history," or "the inclusive orders of modernism and anthropology" (16). Noting the "deep-seated Western habits and systems of value" in these "normal sciences" in the sense of Thomas Kuhn's distinction of the structure of sciences, Clifford seeks to find a more methodologically rich and politically sensitive way of writing culture: "My primary goal is to open space for cultural futures, for the recognition of emergence" (15-16). He achieves this goal by connecting history, ethnography and anthropology in this collection. "Clifford is original and very nearly unique," Clifford Geertz in his jacket blurb for *Predicament* writes. "He's had an enormous impact because he provides a new perspective on the study of culture that would almost certainly never have been generated from within anthropology itself." This "new perspective" combines history, literature and anthropology without necessarily attempting to be all-encompassing, as Clifford says in his introduction: "I do not tell all the possible stories" (15). Instead, he is critical of such an attempt at wholeness and aware of his own partiality: "The book is a spliced ethnographic object, an incomplete collection.... The explorations gathered here cannot—should not—add up to a seamless version. Their partiality is apparent" [5]. Nor is the "new perspective" a fixed one, since he immediately adds this thought provoking Igbo saying: "You do not stand in one place to watch a masquerade" (15). The ability of representing a whole, continuous and pure culture is a deeply compromised idea to the Igbo, as it also apparently is to Clifford. In this saying, Clifford also sees ethnography as "a mode of travel, a way of understanding and getting around in a diverse world" (13).

What Clifford as a historian of anthropology and a critic of the "scientific"/ positivist tradition in ethnographic writing puts in his book *Predicament* is really too diverse to be summarized within a few words. It can be read as a critical ethnography, a genealogy of cultural anthropology, a history of global modernity, an intellectual history of ethnography, and so on. The way I read it as an intellectual history as compared with Anderson's *Origins* results from my interest in seeing how different methodological choices affect the two works differently. If Anderson tries to build a canon of key postmodern thinkers by putting their history into linear and spatial contexts, in Clifford's eyes, temporal and spatial contexts are disrupted. Roots and origins are no longer meaningful, if they have not disappeared altogether, compared with traveling and transplanting. History is no longer a Western story but rather a collaborate one co-

created by the West and the Rest. As Bruce Knaft notes in his genealogical approach to cultural anthropology: "From a postmodern perspective, the notion that anthropology had a distinct and valuable intellectual history was a story, a myth" [6]. Clifford does an intellectual history of ethnography *at a given moment* by a close (re)reading of the works of the ethnographers as well as their biographical details. Now ethnographers become a subject in his examination of ethnography. While similarly engaged in intellectual history, Anderson does it by mapping out linear and spatial contexts, and Clifford does it by textualizing ethnographic writing, ethnographic artifices and the ethnographers themselves. Anderson intends to form a canon of the postmodern history, and Clifford seeks to forge links among literary, history and ethnography. If *Origins* is an analysis of intellectual history, *Predicament* is a performance of it.

What is "the Clifford project"? What is Clifford doing? Has his project been fully realized by what he is doing in *Predicament*? These questions are vital for an understanding and evaluation of his method.

So first, what does Clifford desire to do in this book? Clifford says in the introductory part: "Ethnography, a hybrid activity, thus appear as writing, as collecting, as modernist collage, as imperial power, as subversive critique" (13). This is the proposal of his project: to broaden the narrow professional definition of ethnography. And a quite unprecedented one, in the sense that it breaches the confinement of traditional ethnography as growing out of field notes and locates affinities between ethnography and avant-garde art. A brief genealogy of ethnographic writing may serve for a better understanding of this ambitious Clifford project. This project of reassessing the nature and importance of ethnography can be traced back, as George Marcus suggests, to Malinowski (1922), Kaberry (1957), Louch (1966), Rabinow (1977) and Dumon (1978). After reviewing precursory scholarship of treating ethnography as with independent importance, Marcus laments: "Yet, an understanding of ethnography as a genre rather than fieldwork as personal experience and method remains a blindspot" [7]. His argument has helped to open a theoretical ground for examining ethnography as an independent genre, which is followed by the publication of the influential critical anthology *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986) [8], co-edited by Clifford and Marcus. Widely praised and cited as heralding a new postmodern anthropology, *Writing Culture* marks a fairly dramatic departure from previous anthropological writings. While seriously indicting anthropology as a political activity, this book focuses on a broadly defined poetics of cultural description and critiques. The contributors in this volume emphasize the "poetics," the writerly nature of ethnographic pursuit. Clifford's own *Predicament* significantly advances these arguments. While having this "awareness of the independent importance of ethnographic writing as a genre with its own evolution," Clifford goes beyond it, seeking correlations between ethnography, history, literature and art. Thus, he expands the definition of ethnography and opens new space for cultural studies [7].

To answer another question—What Clifford is doing—

we need a revisit to the text itself, with a little bit of hermeneutic engagement.

*Predicament* consists of a cluster of published and unpublished essays with enormously varying styles, almost too different to fit into one single collection. While being "written and rewritten over a seven-year period," they are now arranged in such an order that is increasingly elusive, indirect, tentative and oxymoronic. This editorial effort seems to echo with the parallel ethnographic transition from realist to reflexive postmodern ethnography. As Clifford himself notes, the book's historical moment has been marked by "a period of unusual theoretical and political questioning of several disciplines and writing traditions" (P. vii). His locating of the book in a certain historical moment is coherent with his call for ethnographic unencumbrance, contrary to "automatic coherence" which Anderson values.

The style of his first chapter "On Ethnographic Authority" resembles to that of Anderson in *Origins* in its clarity and directness. Clifford traces the formation and breakup of ethnographic authority, as embodied in a variety of "modes of authority" ranging from experiential, textual, dialogical, to polyphonic. He argues that the controlling mode of authority is "now inescapably a matter of strategic choice" (what Clifford himself prefers is of course interpretive and multivocal), in order to achieve a "coherent" presentation (54). This obligation to coherence, not explicitly stated and not easy to find in other essays in his book, explains why it is viewed as "the book's weakest and weirdest chapter" [9].

The primary method he uses in this chapter also resembles Anderson in some ways. Clifford traces the general shift from high colonialism around 1900 to postcolonialism and neocolonialism after the 1950s. Situating ethnographic texts in this broad context, he tries to show how ethnographic authority changes historically in response to politically charged situations. In this way, ethnographic texts themselves are depicted as a constructed domain of truth, as one fiction among many others. He does close textual reading of ethnographic writings. Interpretive anthropology has a clear influence on the way he takes culture as a series of texts to be interpreted. Ability to interpret in a coherent way depends on particular acts of reading. Clifford, of course, is a reader with unusual acumen. Then he finds himself in an awkward situation: he is doing a monologue when advocating the killing of monologues. When he is categorizing "ethnographic authority" into four modes and interpreting them respectively in a coherent all-that-is manner, he leaves no room for his reader with his authoritative interpretations.

Clifford's definition of "text" is a postmodern one and much more inclusive than what Anderson deals with in *Origins*. All events, all places or things, all theories are treated as special constructions in a special socio-cultural world. Ethnographers themselves who record and produce texts are without exception, too. Clifford's discussion of French classical ethnographers and his comparative studies of polycultural Joseph Conrad and Malinowski textualizes the ethnographers themselves. Paul Rabinow, as quoted by Clifford in his opening chapter, says: "Clifford takes as his natives, as well as his informants, ... anthropologists... We are being observed and inscribed" [4]. Even his own text

about ethnographers becomes textualized when Clifford frequently reflects on his method and stance in his self-critical comments. In this way, Clifford does not intend to lay out a clear-cut intellectual history and provide a detached analysis of it as Anderson does in *Origins*; rather, Clifford destabilizes the notion of historical continuity and performs intellectual history in a historical contingent situation.

The closing chapter “Identity in Mashpee” best exemplifies Clifford’s method of doing a historical project. Fragmentation, pastiche, and the juxtaposition of images and voices work well together to present a closer-to-the-fact picture. Various versions of Mashpee history are presented offered by plaintiffs and defendants, the trail transcript itself, the discrepancy between expert witnesses who were historians and anthropologists, and the contest between orality and the written form of historical writing. This chapter thus shows the striking strength of a pastiche of multiple voices. Different histories contest with each other. Yet when arranged in a simple non-categorical order—“History I,” “History II,” and “History III”—collectively they display the power of historical narrative. But one wonder when Clifford “oscillates” between narrative paradigms, does he really travel outside the West? The movement Clifford recommends is pretty exclusively a movement between Western narrative paradigms. Even in a statement which sounds like generously intentioned recognition (“Westerners are not the only ones going places in the modern world”), there may be something uncomfortable if seen from the perspective of, say, a Mashpee Indian, who tries to claim land from the white, who cares more about “place” than “going places.” But again, what factors contribute to his traveling within the boundaries? One of the reasons is stated explicitly by Clifford himself: “My topic... is a state of being in culture while looking at culture” (9). His elaboration of “the double ethnographic movement” as embodied in postcolonial critics like Said is also applicable to himself— “Locally based and politically engaged, they must resonant globally; while they engage pervasive postcolonial processes, they do so without overview, from a blatantly partial perspective” (11). This issue of ethnographers’ self-identity is a persistent theme of Clifford’s book. In this interconnected world, “identity is conjunctural, not essential” (11). By doing intrinsically self-challenging readings of ethnographic texts (in the broad sense) in the way that linking literature, ethnography and history, Clifford develops a critically inflected intellectual history of ethnographic knowledge.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Clifford is more methodological conscious and experimental than Anderson in their postmodern project of cultural studies. Anderson is a generalist in an age of the specialist. His approach to the history of ideas is an “unfashionable” totalizing one [2]. Clifford prefers “sharply focused pictures,” composed with no longer innocent intentions. Anderson contextualizes literary texts, while Clifford goes beyond that to textualize ethnographies. Anderson’s endeavors results in an authoritative canon of postmodernity, while the Clifford project is a critique of the politics of canonicity and an act of delegitimizing such an effort of canon-formation. Despite vast differences in how both authors choose their subject and develop their arguments, their methodological choices in intellectual history are predetermined by their own political agendas, their self-identity and their disciplinary background, which in turn circumscribe the kinds of project they can accomplish.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] P. Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement*, New York: Verso, 1992.
- [2] G. Elliott, *Perry Anderson: The Merciless Laboratory of History*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- [3] T. Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, p. vii.
- [4] J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- [5] J. Clifford, “Called for a ‘plural poesis,’ noting that ‘Ethnographic truths are ... inherently partial—committed and incomplete’”, *Introduction to Writing Culture*, p. 17, 1986.
- [6] B. Knauff, *Genealogies for the Present in Cultural Anthropology*, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 26.
- [7] G. E. Marcus, “Rhetorical and the ethnographic genre in anthropological research,” in *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflective Perspectives in Anthropology*, R. Jay, Ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982, pp. 164-165.
- [8] *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, J. Clifford and G. Marcus, Eds. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986.
- [9] E. Rechburg-Halton, “The predicament of culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art (reviews),” *Contemporary Sociology*, no. 18, issue 6, pp. 934-936, Nov. 1989.



**Wei Liang**, an English major, was born in Zhong Xian on February 5 ,1973. He graduated from Sichuan Teachers’ College with bachelor degree in English Education in 1997. He has been teaching English for 22 years in Zhong Xian Middle School , Chong Qing , China. Now he is a senior teacher at high school with several rewards for over ten publications and has been honored as a dedicated educator.