

Book Review

Marking Time. On the Anthropology of the Contemporary, by Paul Rabinow

Princeton University Press, 2008

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Studying contemporary practices like genomics or nanotechnology as an anthropologist looks like an unachievable task. The time pressures and rapid transformations in contemporary science and technology seem to be at odds with the temporalities of traditional anthropology. Is anthropology with its time-consuming methods still adequate to inquire into the contemporary world?

Paul Rabinow wrote *Marking Time. On the Anthropology of the Contemporary* to explore how anthropology might survive in the 21st century. What new methods of inquiry and modes of production do anthropologists, who strive to analyze and interpret the contemporary, need?

Rabinow starts his search for new anthropological methods with the question of what the contemporary is. He identifies two meanings. The first is the ordinary English-language meaning: contemporary means that something occurs at the same period of time as something else. The issue is not *when* something happened, but that it happened at the same period of time. Cicero was the contemporary of Caesar just as the German painter Gerhard Richter was the contemporary of chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, as Rabinow explains.

In the second meaning, however, ‘the moment when’ does have significance. Here the contemporary is considered to be part of ‘modernity’. Not modernity as a period of time, but modernity as an attitude, an *ethos*, a way of relating to the present. Rabinow’s interpretation of the contemporary relies heavily on Michel Foucault’s analysis of modernity. In his essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’, published in *The Foucault Reader* (edited by Rabinow in 1984), Michel Foucault argued:

I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by “attitude,” I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality (...) A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an ethos.’²

In *Marking Time*, Rabinow continues this analysis and identifies the contemporary as a ‘moving ratio’ of modernity. The contemporary is “moving through the recent past and near future in a (nonlinear) space that gauges modernity as an ethos already becoming historical”. If we would abandon epochal thinking, he argues, it would become clear that in many domains old and new elements coexist in all kinds of variations. For example, the finding that race is not a category at the molecular level does not mean that older understandings of race disappear or undergo a total transformation.

Rabinow considers the question of how older and newer elements are worked together to be a significant site of inquiry for anthropologists of the contemporary. The focus in this inquiry is

not surprisingly on figures of *anthropos*, i.e. the question of who we are in the present, what kind of living beings we are, given a rapidly changing *bios* and *logos* (changing biology, changing scientific knowledge and ways of speaking, and changing power relations through which forms of knowledge are produced and disseminated).

The answer Rabinow gives on the first pages of the book on the question of how to conduct an anthropology of the contemporary is by just doing it, “that is to say, by laying out examples and reflections on those examples”. It is better to show than to tell. He himself and his co-workers at the Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaboratory (ARC) (www.anthropos-lab.net) at the University of California have shown to be very successful in their inquiries. Books like *Making PCR: A Story of Biotechnology* (an ethnographic account of the invention of PCR)³ and *French DNA. Trouble in Purgatory* (an account of an agreement between a French genetics lab and an American biotechnology company in which French DNA would be given to the Americans)⁴ give evidence of the significance of anthropological research on contemporary biotechnology. What is it that makes these anthropological inquiries successful?

When reading *Marking Time* we might easily conclude that it is the rapidity with which Rabinow conducts his research. After being invited to conduct anthropological research at Celera Diagnostics in 2003, he decided for example to finish the project within a year. And indeed, *A Machine to Make a Future* (co-authored with Talia Dan-Cohen) appeared in 2004.⁵ Rabinow’s speed of inquiring and publishing challenges the traditional view of anthropology: a slow and time-consuming activity in which investigators try to witness and record as much as possible.

In *Marking Time*, Rabinow describes how he, already as a student resisted the idea that the role of anthropology was to record as much as possible. One of the key messages he remembers of working with Clifford Geertz in Morocco in 1968 is that as an anthropologist you have to choose what contemporary processes are significant for inquiry. Anthropology is not just a matter of witnessing, but also an act of interpretation or diagnosis.

The anthropologist that Rabinow has in mind has a modern attitude. He remains open to the present, and is interested in the difference that today introduces with regard to yesterday. One of the central issues of our time, according to Rabinow’s interpretation, is the transformation that occurs in our understanding of what a human being is. Given a changing biology, the question that concerns the anthropologist of the contemporary is: What ways of speaking and knowing are appropriate for the human being today? What, for example, does the shift in molecular biology towards more dynamic ways of conceptualizing DNA – from genetics to genomics, proteomics and so on - mean for our understanding of living beings?

The anthropologist of the contemporary is not interested in narratives of decline or disaster, or in straightforward descriptions of the world. He wants actively to ponder and engage in the world, among other ways by giving form to the things about which he inquires. Rabinow gives an example of this method, recounting an exchange he had at the Molecular Science Institute in Berkeley. He told a colleague that ‘race’ has no scientific meaning when it comes to human beings. When asked to identify himself, he said, he often puts down ‘pink’. The scientist was stunned and said that race is a perfectly good category. Anyone can see that there are races, so there must be something genetic about race. What was taken for granted in

the anthropological circles appeared to be unfamiliar in the circle of molecular scientists. The exchange brought Rabinow to the conclusion that in these kinds of interactions a form of pedagogical response is required, for example teaching and lecturing on genomics and race.

But why would a molecular scientist accept that an anthropologist knows more about changing figures of *anthropos*? What expertise does the anthropologist have that the molecular scientist lacks? The answer is simple: the anthropologist's expertise is on *how we understand* the human being, whereas the biologist's expertise is on what the biology of living beings is or could be. The anthropologist's task is to bring reflection into the field he explores. By asking what Rabinow calls 'innocent questions', he induces a learning process, a practice of *Bildung*, in which the various actors learn, in collaboration with each other, step by step what the actual is, what is passing away, or what possibilities the future will bring.

Rabinow's book is written in line with this idea of *Bildung*. Rather than a manual for how to become an anthropologist of the contemporary, it is a reflective, reiterative and critical search for differences that today makes with regard to yesterday. We are invited to share and build a 'pliable logic'. The author shows us how to ponder and engage in a world crowded by artists, philosophers, biologists and ordinary people. Interpretations of the paintings of German artist Gerhard Richter, of Aristotle's writing on appropriate anger, and of John Dewey's theories on the concept and practice of inquiry are juxtaposed with interpretations of newer events such as the 1990s 'race' to sequence the human genome between Craig Venter's biotech company Celera Genomics and the publicly funded consortium or the failure of the Human Genome Diversity Project to get under way. Without some knowledge of philosophy and anthropology, it may be difficult to understand the deeper layers of the various essays assembled in this book. But for those who take up the challenge to join the author in his travel through time, anthropology, philosophy, genomics, literature and painting, reading this rich and explorative book is an experience that inescapably forces upon us the question of what kind of human beings we are today.

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² P. Rabinow (ed). 1984. *The Foucault Reader. An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*. London: Penguin Books.

³ P. Rabinow. 1996. *Making PCR. A Story of Biotechnology*. Chicago/London: Chicago University Press.

⁴ P. Rabinow. 1999. *French DNA. Trouble in Purgatory*. Chicago/London: Chicago University Press.

⁵ P. Rabinow and T. Dan-Cohen. 2006. *A Machine to Make a Future: Biotech Chronicles*. 2nd edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press.