

Anthropology, Existence and Individuals

Volume 1

Existence in the Details

**Theory and Methodology
in Existential Anthropology**

By

Albert Piette



Duncker & Humblot · Berlin

ALBERT PIETTE

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Translated by Matthew Cunningham



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To Charlotte

“I like to think that the moon is there even if I am not looking at it.”

(Albert Einstein)

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Introduction

This book invites readers to circulate among leftovers, sometimes among leftovers of leftovers abandoned by the social sciences after their process of data filtering and selection, those remainders that did not resist the observation, conceptualization or writings of sociology or social anthropology. This book is an anthropology book. This seems to me to be beyond doubt. But it is not a social or cultural anthropology book on a group, on an activity, actions or interactions. Let's say it is a work of existential anthropology. When readers reach the end, I would like them to be convinced, if they are not already, that existential anthropology has confirmed that it exists and that it can exist with methods and concepts¹.

Historians of philosophy could explain that for a long time, this discipline was a debate about essences and categories. Anthropologists could themselves also think that their discipline has its own "essences", that is to say themes and perspectives that allow them to side-step existence: societies, cultures, social issues, representations, structures, but also, more recently, activities, actions, modes of expression and even non-humans. What is anthropology? It is doubtful that the answer consists of a strictly sociocultural definition. When Merleau-Ponty evoked the crisis of philosophy in the 1930s, he noted that one of the lost causes was that of existence (Merleau-Ponty 1997: 39). In anthropology, especially in France, the impact of Lévi-Strauss' thought has made this an impossible task, so virulent was his contempt for the individual and empiricism, the situation and the "me", which he deemed only suitable for a "shopgirl's philosophy" (Lévi-Strauss 1961: 62).

Is not the genius of anthropology, in all its still current expressions, to have ignored, dissolved or forgotten human beings in their most unique possession: the fact of existing? Is this the price that had to be paid to create science, whether social or biological? Anthropology is certainly one of the rare fields that has let its "subject" drift away to the point that the discipline is no longer the equivalent of the etymological meaning of its name. This being the case, it is not tautological to speak of an anthropology of human beings, as it would be if one spoke of the zoology of animals or the "botany of plants", to borrow Heidegger's expression (1996: 46). Observing the human, considering the human! *The hu-*

¹ I thank the Research Commission of the University of Paris West and the Centre for Ethnology and Comparative Sociology (CNRS – University of Paris West) for their subsidy.

man, *a* human, *several* humans: the social sciences have chosen their “articles”. Always humans clarified in their social and cultural specificity: assembled, grouped humans in their social synthesis (classes, social groups, etc.) and/or cultural synthesis (cultures, systems of representations, thoughts, etc.). This is the work of the social sciences: sociology, social and cultural anthropology. Though they use different theories and methodologies, they ultimately constitute one, single social science maintaining the illusion that there are differences between them by means of their lack of contact, their bibliographical independence, or through the geographic compartmentalization of their subjects or work themes. This perspective implies that it is humans (in varying numbers) who are observed together, grouped in the analysis according to assimilated, “same-ized” characteristics presented as shared by all. It is also humans studied in their links, relationships, connections, interactions and activities. Observation, description and analysis therefore focus on the inter-human, since the entity to understand is the action, the relationship, or the interaction. And when the focus of the observation is placed on humans, this is done with a view to quickly grouping them into an appropriate set.

When I decided to go into anthropology, it was in order to observe and consider the human being, not “togethered” humans, cultural differences, or social relations but “separated” humans and the human in general. This is of course another set². And it is certainly possible to meet these initial objectives through work that involves grouping and then comparing humans. But this is only done very rarely. Few social anthropologists think in terms of universals. One cause of this scarcity is that comparative and theoretical acts that can say something about humans are performed on the basis of human sets, quickly losing sight of the humans themselves for the benefit of a sociocultural synthesis. This book tries to stick to the line: one human, different humans, the human. It presupposes bringing the focus back onto humans, one at a time, in a situation, to compare humans as part of an attempt to consider the human, ideally presuming that the final comparison must be made as late as possible, so that at the moment of observation, the resulting collective perspective does not absorb individual singularity. This would be the ideal of an anthropology of existences.

This individual right here, the one who exists, is he not more that the sum of various psychological, biological, social and cultural characteristics? He is existence, he exists. I will relate this book to a few quotations. “It is a very great fault in a painter,” Leonardo da Vinci writes, “to repeat the same motions in figures, and the same folds in draperies in the same composition, as also to make all the faces alike” (Leonardo da Vinci 2004: 48). This takes us straight to the heart of

² This does not imply giving more meanings than necessary to the term “species”, which Darwin viewed “as one arbitrarily given, for the sake of convenience, to a set of individuals closely resembling each other” (Darwin 2006: 34).

observation methods. What does the eye capture when it observes? What does it see? And how? Close up or far away? In general or in detail? How are details incorporated into the work of constructing the object? On a photographic image of any scene, all of the different faces would necessarily appear, but what do specialists in the social sciences make of them? They probably would not see them. And even if they were to base their work on photographs and filmed images, as their research progressed they would risk very quickly losing sight of each person's small differences. Recording everything that happens, getting through all the data: this concerns gestures just as much as mental states. Photo or film images are of course decisive because they enable gestures and movements to be spotted, but also from these images interviews about states of mind to be realized. In existential anthropology, it is a matter of spotting, writing and representing the detailed richness of instants of presence. This is discernible not just horizontally, in gestures peripheral to the situation's central activity, but also vertically in the always fluid, nuanced and changing experience of human beings.

"I do not portray being, I portray passing. Not the passing from one age to another, or, as the people say, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute", Montaigne writes (2003: 740). In a footnote to his *Essays*, he explains that he does not create a portrait, a static analysis of himself, but he gives his observations from day to day – and observations on his variations. Passing, continuity, here-and-now existence that continues, coming from various situations and continuing towards other situations: these set themselves up as themes that seem impossible for a traditional ethnography of specific situations and activities.

"I was thinking *appurtenances*," writes Sartre, "I was saying to myself that the sea belonged to the class of green objects, or that green formed part of the sea's qualities. Even when I looked at things, I was miles from thinking that they existed: they looked like stage scenery to me. I picked them up in my hands, they served me as tools, I foresaw their resistance. But all that happened on the surface. If anybody had asked me what existence was, I should have replied in good faith, that it was nothing, just an empty form which added itself to external things, without changing anything in their nature. And then, all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself." Existence is as if "in excess", according to Sartre's expression. In any case, it is more than an effect of expression or an effect of categorization, as can be read in various recent writings in the social sciences that nevertheless highlight the ideas of existence and the existent. Existence is an extra; it, too, seems to be a leftover, one that is not reducible to the "pooling" of the social sciences, not reducible to the logic of belonging or the effects of relations. The details of the faces remind us of this. Existence is unique; it is that of this man, of that woman.

In this book, I set out three different exercises I undertook during my field-work in Belgium and France: the observation of a single individual in his day-by-