

Briefly, “What are concepts?” and the handmaiden of colonialism again

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Abstract. This paper makes two criticisms of the book *Key Concepts in Social and Cultural Anthropology*, by Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing. The second criticism is that they do not acknowledge the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges as the conceiver of the fictional Chinese encyclopaedia. What they say raises the worry that anthropologists have not moved on much from being the handmaiden of colonialism.

Draft version: Version 1 (11th November 2022).

Is it things one is expected to mark

In the PhilPapers car park?

There is something I find pleasing about the book *Key Concepts in Social and Cultural Anthropology*, something about the style. But as I was reading it, a criticism occurred to me, as it will to various people with a background in philosophy. I shall present the criticism, in case it is of some use to someone. Pages later there is material which prompted another criticism, which may be more important. I shall present it second though. By the way, I don't have access to the second edition.

The first criticism: concepts. The book is called “Key Concepts...” but what is a concept? The authors, Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing, tell us:

More technically, one might wish to identify by ‘concepts’ the specific things that human beings think about, the meaning(s) of those things at particular moments,

and the relations between those things and various other things in a classificatory array. (2000: ix)

If I were trying to briefly introduce concepts, with no aim to or space to massively overturn our commonsense outlook, I would not say that they are the things that human beings think about. Let's start with what human beings talk about and then move to thought, where analogous points apply. Here are two sentences:

- (a) Dr. Wade gave a really good lecture.
- (b) The word "lecture" comes from Latin.

The first sentence uses the word "lecture" but it is about an actual lecture, not about the word "lecture." The second sentence is about the word itself. Similarly, the thought "He gave a really good lecture" uses the concept of a lecture, but it is not about the concept of lecture. In contrast, the thought "The concept of a lecture is culturally universal, because in all cultures there are people who lecture others, leading people in all cultures to form this concept" is about the concept of a lecture (and perhaps about lectures as well).

Even if what one thinks about is mind-dependent or society-dependent, there is a difference between thinking about the concept of something and about the thing itself. There is a difference between thinking about money ("This child needs money") and the concept of money ("The concept of money was absent in barter societies"). But I think it is common to slip between the two, and I find myself inadvertently doing so sometimes as well, especially if I write fast.

A brief way of introducing concepts is that they are word meanings. If your child asks, "What is a lecture?" and you explain and present some examples and they now understand the meaning of the word "lecture," then they have that concept. But this brief way is potentially

misleading, partly because there are concepts associated with combinations of words, rather than single words, for example the concept of the handmaiden of colonialism is the concept associated with the words “the handmaiden of colonialism.” But it is probably a good brief way of introducing concepts.

The second criticism: handmaiden again. I was also struck by this claim by the authors, Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing:

In a well-known example provided by Foucault (1973), a Chinese encyclopedia suggests the following division of animals: a) belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) tame, d) sucking pigs, e) sirens, f) fabulous, g) stray dogs, h) included in the present classification, i) frenzied, j) innumerable, k) drawn with a very fine camel-hair brush, l) et cetera, m) having just broken the water pitcher, n) that from a long way off look like flies. (2000: 84)

It is a fictional example. It is indeed famous, but it is famously by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. (Has there been some alteration? Do I not understand the situation? Is it a bad idea for Borges to claim this?) Perhaps “provided” is not meant to indicate creation, but it is surely likely to be taken by a student who consults the accessible encyclopaedia in that way. (There are a lot of French thinkers referred to elsewhere in this book, such as Auge, Bachelard, Durkheim, Foucault, Latour, Lyotard, and Sartre.) I think most writers would represent this as Borges’s fictional Chinese encyclopaedia. Anthropology has often been charged with having been the handmaiden of colonialism – a servant of colonial projects. It is a charge directed at anthropology some decades ago, but if a native of some other country comes up with an idea and it just gets credited to a Frenchman, why should critics not say that the anthropologists who do that are handmaidens of French colonialism?!

One might further hypothesize that the heavy political correctness recommendations in British anthropology in recent decades are because someone has concluded, “That is what is needed to move various anthropologists one inch away from that direction!” I don’t know. Below is a picture for those who would like one, despite the cost, I suppose, last time.



Reference

Rapport, N. and Overing, J. 2000. *Key Concepts in Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: Routledge.