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# Much More than a Metaphor: Translation in Anthropology

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Translated by Tim Gutteridge

This is a modified and expanded version of: Gustavo Sorá, “Traducción: potencial heurístico y desvíos teóricos de un tópico eficaz para pensar realmente la globalización,” *Revista de Estudios Sociales* 61 (2017), 99-105.

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Mains English – on the lines of mains drainage. The disaster scenario only allows for one single language, without authors or oeuvres – *Globish*, a portmanteau of *Global English* – and dialects. All the European languages, French, German, and so on, will be mere parochial dialects, to be spoken at home, and to be protected like threatened species via heritage policies: relics for the Digital Humanities museum.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1990s, theories of globalization spread as rapidly as neoliberalism. Their effects are widely recognized and continue to have a major influence on broad sectors

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Cassin, *Éloge de la traduction. Compliquer l’universel* (Paris: Fayard, 2016), 55.

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of the social sciences and the humanities. These include attacks on scientific thought in the rationalist-universalist tradition and the proclamation of a New Era, recognizable in discourse distinguished by the use of the prefixes “pluri-,” “trans-” and “post-,” the use of neologisms, generally to demonstrate the increasing uniformity of human experiences, and a fascination with the metaphorical. If the Globish alluded to by Barbara Cassin in the epigraph is a sign of the new global communication, it was not until the start of this century that new areas of investigation were established to understand “the global cultural reality” from other perspectives. Like studies of the book and of publishing, studies of translation began to grow slowly in the mid-1980s but multiplied rapidly from 2000 onward. Today, it is beyond doubt that these areas constitute two of the most stimulating domains for the theoretical renewal of the social sciences and the humanities. Because they are rooted primarily in disciplines such as history and sociology, studies of the book and publishing have not been so greatly affected by the vogues of contemporary theory. This is not the case with translation studies, which has strong links to studies of literature, semiology and the communication sciences. The “actualist fascination” with translation is evidenced by an exaggeration of the virtues of the term itself as a metaphor, as a means of replacing symbols: the expression, in one language, of words written or spoken in another in the strict use or the replacement of one complex sign with another that is more effective for the purposes of comprehension in the broad sense.

To avoid simplifications and to observe both the theoretical detours and the heuristic potential of studies of translation, I will focus my analysis on the term’s place in anthropological theory. In this discipline, appeals to translation also accompanied the destabilization of the paradigms of modernity and debates about globalization, making it a key concept in understanding the relationship between global processes and local experiences. Anthropology in the English-speaking world has played the leading role in legitimating this approach. It has accompanied the development of comprehensive perspectives, gaining visibility with the development of interpretivism, and being elevated to the condition of an epistemological device that has been consolidated in the intellectual sphere characteristic of studies of a post-modern or post-colonial nature.

Since the 1990s, discourses around “cultural translation” have expanded and it seems reasonable to argue that this has become a trend.<sup>3</sup>

This text aims to observe this theoretical development, locating it within a genealogy of analytical perspectives that characterize anthropological theory and relating it to alternative disciplinary approaches including the anthropology of written culture, history of the book, and the sociology of translation in order to critically observe how anthropologists have addressed the subject of translation. This archaeology seeks to circumscribe the limitations and the potential of the problem of translation in anthropology in particular, and in the social sciences in general.

In a similar fashion to the notion of text as privileged analogy used by Geertz and his epigones to redefine the concept of culture, anthropologists have only treated translation as a metaphor that helps understand intercultural contacts. For those who follow closely the premises of the hermeneutical turn, cultures are comparable to texts. These are always the product of intercultural contacts, the human experience of difference, of otherness, the never-ending translation of meanings that do not recognize a necessary origin. Everything is comparable to texts that are susceptible to exegesis; the communication of differences implies transcription; everything is a kind of translation.

When undertaking ethnographic, sociological, and historical investigations of translations of literature and social sciences between different languages and national cultures, I encountered the fact that while translation might be good for thinking about global–local realities and one’s own discipline, it is above all a concrete practice. It encompasses distinct linguistic procedures, establishes delimited practices, involves competencies that are not universally distributed, structures particular social and symbolic relations, traces its own history, and entails political and economic dimensions. I argue, then, that translation is a phenomenon *sui generis* which deserves to be treated

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<sup>3</sup> In translation studies, there are many who define the current period as an Era of Translation, in which “because ‘everything is translatable’, everything is interchangeable.” Michael Cronin, “The Translation Age: Translation, Technology and the New Instrumentalism,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 469-82.

as a social act worthy of empirical study. If theory only becomes possible and necessary in the dialectic between the general and the particular, this essay seeks to define the relationship between anthropology and translation in order to overcome the limitations of metaphor and propose a field of research which, paradoxically, has barely been explored by anthropologists and which we might call the ethnography of translation.<sup>4</sup>

## Translation as a Metaphor in Anthropological Theory

The notion of translation as central to the anthropologist's activity appears sporadically in anthropological theory at least from 1950 onwards, when E. E. Evans-Pritchard delivered his Marett Lectures at Oxford. He surprised the audience by abandoning his previous structural functionalist views and affirming that, when interpreting, the anthropologist "translates from one culture into another."<sup>5</sup> A decade later, Claude Lévi-Strauss used the metaphor of translation in his inaugural class as professor at the Collège de France: "When we consider some system of belief (let us say totemism) [...] we attempt to *translate* into our language rules originally conceived in another language."<sup>6</sup>

The break between anthropology and the rationalism of a science that aspired to be on a par with the natural sciences finally came with the emergence of interpretivism in the 1960s and 1970s. Clifford Geertz, the most widely known proponent of this

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<sup>4</sup> For reasons of space, I cannot set out my ethnographic perspective here. The reader is referred to texts in which I have discussed this at greater length: Gustavo Sorá, "Un échange dénié. La traduction d'auteurs brésiliens en Argentine," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 145 (2002), 61–70; Gustavo Sorá, Alejandro Dujovne and Heber Ostroviesky, "Une périphérie centrale. Traduction et édition en Argentine," in *Les sciences humaines en traduction: les livres français aux États-Unis, au Royaume-Uni, en Argentine*, ed. Gisèle Sapiro (Paris: CESSP – EHESS – Éditions de l'Institut Français, 2014), 111–43; Gustavo Sorá, *A History of Book Publishing in Contemporary Latin America* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), chapters 2, 7 and 8.

<sup>5</sup> Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1954), 4–23. The turn that he explained in the Marett lecture derived from his historic study of the Alawite Bedouins: Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1949).

<sup>6</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology 2*, trans. C. Jacobson and B. Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 10. Translation was also the synthetic reference with which Lévi-Strauss characterized the anthropologist's intellectual attitude to operate on the rules of permutations that string together the different systems of classification and thought: "the property of a system of signs is to be transformable, in other words *translatable*, into the language of another system with the help of substitutions" (19, author's emphasis).

approach, wove together the analogies of text and translation in two seminal books. *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) describes culture as an imposition of texts written in strange languages, in blurred characters, whose reading and interpretation require translation. This analogy is taken further in *Blurred Genres* (1980): “To see social institutions, social customs, social changes as in some sense ‘readable’ is to alter our whole sense of what such interpretation is and shift it toward modes of thought rather more familiar to the translator, the exegete, or the iconographer than to the test giver, the factor analyst, or the pollster.”<sup>7</sup> By the mid-1980s, the radicalization of some of the premises of interpretivism led to the foundation of what would be termed post-modern anthropology. In studying the rise of this intellectual formation in the North American setting, Carlos Reynoso repeats the observation of other historians who link the start of this movement of cultural criticism to a footnote in *The Interpretation of Cultures* in which Geertz stated “what the anthropologist primarily does is to write.” For Reynoso, a break with the program of “thick description” proposed by Geertz is expressed in the fact that post-modern anthropology was concerned with the study of texts about cultures rather than with approaching cultures as if they were texts.<sup>8</sup>

One peculiarity of this intellectual movement in anthropology is its collective face, manifested in the emergence and configuration of a clearly defined discursive formation which encompassed translation as a topic of progressive recursion. Following a seminar in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the 1986 publication of *Writing Cultures* boosted the international reputation of James Clifford, George Marcus, Renato Rosaldo and others. Translation as an epistemological problem appears in this movement in a chapter by Talal Asad. In “Translation in British anthropology” he draws on the model debates in the theory of translation as a warning of the alternatives, the dangers and the risks that are taken in cultural translation, in the journey between an original and the version

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<sup>7</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought,” in *Local Knowledge. Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 31.

<sup>8</sup> Carlos Reynoso, Introduction to *El surgimiento de la antropología posmoderna* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2008), 11-59.

translated into other languages. He refers to “The Task of the Translator” by Walter Benjamin, and concludes

“The language of a translation can – in fact must – let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself” [...]. A good translation should always precede a critique. And we can turn this around by saying that a good critique is always an “internal” critique – that is, one based on some shared understanding, on a joint life, which it aims to enlarge and make more coherent.<sup>9</sup>

Good translation is a privilege of the semiotic dimension in which the anthropologist must strive to achieve the purest and most acceptable exegesis possible. This notion may have been original in anthropology but it was already well established in translation theory.<sup>10</sup> Post-modern anthropology completed its intellectual legitimation in the mid-1990s when systematic criticism of the underlying assumptions of classical anthropological theory gathered pace, and it received further stimulation from a range of empirical research in a globalized world characterized by uncertainty, risk and violence. At the core of the theory, anchored in tradition, particularism and a coherent identity, the classical notion of culture as “that complex whole” and of society as a totality with clear, exclusive borders was deconstructed. Secondly, the observation of ambivalence, contradiction, the instability of experience, of the subject and of modernity were foregrounded through topics such as “systems of creolization,” “flows” and “hybridizations,” “non-places,” and “non-comparable scenes or scapes.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Talal Asad, “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology,” in James Clifford and George E. Marcus eds., *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 156-7. The first part of this quote is a direct reproduction of Benjamin’s essay (editors’ note).

<sup>10</sup> Due to restrictions of space, I cannot go into post-modern anthropology’s borrowings from translation theory in detail. For a holistic view of this subject, see Lawrence Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Marc Augé, *Non-Places. An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995); Lee Drummond, “The Cultural Continuum: A Theory of Intersystem,” *Man* 15, no. 2 (1980), 352–74; Néstor García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas. Estrategias para*

The concept of translation was stabilized and acquired theoretical weight in the diverse theoretical space that extends from post-modernism to cultural and post-colonial studies. Of the latter, *Siting Translation* by Tejaswini Niranjana (1992) is a good example. She argues that translation inevitably entails modes of representing the other. In this view, acts of translation commissioned from the West were responsible for generalizing representations of the colonized. According to Niranjana, since the nineteenth century, literary and ethnographic translations acted as vehicles for descriptions of the world, revealing the complicity of critics and anthropologists in the expansion of European imperialism. Implicit in translation is a whole western philosophy. Even when political criticism is expressed, this is done through the medium of translation, which itself cannot transcend the sphere of language.

Following the resonance of *Writing Cultures* (1986) and *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), it was no surprise that James Clifford was the author who established the problem of translation in anthropology, including it in the title of the book that followed its predecessors in his program to displace cultural studies: *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997). The prologue sets out a series of dominant assumptions shared by the authors who used translation as a key concept in contemporary anthropological theory. Being there – the account of the anthropologist’s contact with exotic tribes in distant lands – was the stylistic mold for the start of classical ethnographic monographs. After Geertz<sup>12</sup> and Sahlins<sup>13</sup> it became usual to replace the heroic journey with meta-stories, experiences of other travelers in contact situations that were revealing of the contingent, arbitrary, dynamic, and conflicting character of intercultural relations. At the beginning of *Routes*, Clifford considers Amitav Ghosh and his autobiographical narrative as an Indian ethnographer in a rural village in the Nile

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*entrar y salir de la modernidad* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1992); Ulf Hannerz, “Fluxos, fronteiras, híbridos: palavras-chave da antropologia transnacional,” *Mana* 3, no. 1 (1997), 7–39.

<sup>12</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) and his *Local Knowledge*.

<sup>13</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities. Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Island Kingdom* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1981).

delta.<sup>14</sup> Despite the vestiges of traditionalism, the village visited by the ethnographer was inhabited by people whose history and subjectivity were marked by journeys to distant lands. Ghosh said: “the men of the village had all the busy restlessness of airline passengers in a transit lounge,” and Clifford commented: “It is hard to imagine a better figure for postmodernity, the new world order of mobility, of rootless histories.”<sup>15</sup> *Routes* instead of *roots*. While the author identifies imperial legacies, world wars, and industrial capitalism as three forms of western power, three connected global forces that, in the twentieth century, accelerated migration flows and intercultural relations, he argues that the interconnection of cultures is part of human genetics. The journey as a means of appropriating otherness is a norm of all human experience; it is as primitive and universal as the formation of the sense of self. Clifford’s book brings together essays in a heterogeneous style which focus on scenes of cultural life at the end of the twentieth century: it sees movement and contact as crucial dynamics of an unfinished modernity. These emphasize the human differences articulated by displacements, shared cultural experiences, structures and possibilities of a world of increased connections but not homogeneous ones. The border, the edges, the zones of contact and contamination are highlighted as conceptual and confrontational centers. Translation appears at the end of the prologue to *Routes*. Clifford thinks of it as a concept that is homologous to that of travel and intercultural connection.<sup>16</sup> However, unlike travel, which in the book is described as a historical act of a particular type, translation is scarcely treated as a metaphor: “It assumes that all broadly meaningful concepts, terms such as ‘travel’, are translations, built from imperfect equivalences.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See also Claire Chambers, “Anthropology as Cultural Translation: Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land*,” *Postcolonial Text* 2, no. 3 (2006), 1–19.

<sup>15</sup> James Clifford, *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>16</sup> “Thinking historically is a process of locating oneself in space and time. And a location is an itinerary rather than a bounded site, it is a series of encounters and translations” (Clifford, *Routes*, 11).

<sup>17</sup> Clifford, *Routes*, 11.

For Clifford, comparative concepts are terms of translation, approximations that privilege certain originals and are oriented towards certain audiences. On the methodological plane, he proposes a collage in which edges are marked and crossed. “Diaspora,” “bordering spaces,” “migrant condition,” “tourism,” “pilgrimage,” “exile” are translatable travel terms. However, the historical contingency of translations means that these will always be imperfect and incomplete. He cites Benjamin, an iconic cultural critic for theorists of post-modernism, in the classic opposition *traduttore-traditore*, translator and traitor: fidelity to the original or free version? The guiding question of James Clifford’s meditations is what are the conditions for rigorous translations between different routes in a modernity that is interconnected but not homogeneous? Routes instead of cultures, translation instead of comparison. Clifford does not conceive of people as being fixed by their own identity and, against this view, translation offers a conceptual resource to retain the ambivalence of values, ideas and experiences, the heterogeneous elements of meaningful assemblages. This entails a criticism of the comparative method:

there is no single location from which a full comparative account could be produced. [...] the struggle to perceive certain borders of my own perspective is not an end in itself but a precondition for efforts of attentiveness, translation, and alliance. [...] It follows that there is no cure for the troubles of cultural politics in some old or new vision of consensus or universal values. There is only more translation.<sup>18</sup>

Translation seduces and expands its presence in the discourse of anthropological theory to the point where the metaphor flows or switches between method and ontology.

Of the authors who have in recent years deepened the theory of anthropology as cultural translation, Paula Rubel and Abraham Rosman have been two of the most productive. Together they published *Translating Cultures. Perspectives on Translation and Anthropology* (2003). The title, of course, is a nod to *Writing Cultures*. It is as if reflection on translation were the natural next step after apprehending or domesticating

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<sup>18</sup> Clifford, *Routes*, 11-13.

the political implications of ethnographic writing and authority. Rubel and Rosman open their book with a review of the attitudes that can be observed in the history of the discipline with respect to the relationship of anthropologists to the primary information on which their reflections are based, necessarily filtered by the processes of recording, transcription, re-encoding, and translation. They confirm the absence of a detailed discussion of what translation entails, the inevitable effects of knowing other cultures in terms of one's own culture. Aware that this inexplicable vacuum is a rich field for analytical expansion, their brief synopsis of the history of theory predictably focuses on James Clifford, his quote from Benjamin, and the allegory of the translator as a potential traitor. As with the issue of authority and the intention of an anthropology of dialogue and experimentation, Clifford had the virtue of highlighting major questions which others then strove to describe in more detail and to expand upon. Rubel and Rosman drink from the fountains of literary criticism and translation studies. It is important to note that the redundancy of anthropological approaches to translation studies was the result not so much of raising awareness of analysts of other cultures but of the intensification of inter-disciplinary exchanges. At the same time, translation theory saw a shift regarding the inexhaustible hermeneutic problem of good translation. From the correlations between the source text and the target text, and judgements regarding the fidelity or distortions in the act of translation – the point where the metaphor of translation ended in Asad and Clifford – there was a move to gloss and contextualization, the focus of para- and supratextual concerns of dialogic translations. The result, as Benjamin anticipated, is the disposition to transform the language and culture of the analyst via appropriations from – or contact with – other texts and cultures.

## Towards an Ethnography of Translation

For a critique of references to translation in post-modern anthropology, it is possible to set out questions analogous to those asked of Geertzian interpretivism: just as, in culture, not everything is text, so not every cultural relationship or every interpretation is translation. The metaphor of translation carries greater risks than that of text for, while

the latter is, as Foucault shows,<sup>19</sup> an unavoidable material unit, translation – as is revealed by the fact that the name of the translator is not highlighted on the cover of the book and may not even appear at all – is often an invisible practice.<sup>20</sup> The criticism I draw on flourished in the dialogues between cultural history and the sociology of culture. In his now classic polemic on Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984), Roger Chartier asked:

Is it legitimate to consider as 'texts' actions carried out or tales told? [...] But can we qualify as a text both the written document (the only remaining trace of an older practice) and that practice itself? [...] Metaphorical use of terms like 'text' or 'reading' is always risky, and it is even more so when the only access to the object under anthropological investigation is a written text. Not only does it obliterate the ways of speaking or acting that gave the tale or the rite as much significance as its literal meaning (or even more); above all, a real text with a status of its own stands between the observer and this oral or festive supposed 'text'.<sup>21</sup>

Chartier warns of the importance of distinguishing two types of logic: written expressions and practices. The metaphors of culture as text not only carry the risk of impoverishing our understanding of the logic of practices but may also skate over the textuality of texts as objects, subjects, and precise cultural mediations which in the mutations of the forms of reading invigorates certain processes of civilization, in which the details of the printed line and word entail specific modes of cognition, of experience, of being in the world.<sup>22</sup> Non-textual practices configure logics that cannot be reduced to those of writing, reading and exegesis. It is understandable that anthropologists do not read Chartier or Darnton – though the latter was a close collaborator of Clifford Geertz at Princeton

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<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, *L'ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

<sup>20</sup> The invisibility of the translator was considered from both a historiographical and theoretical perspective by Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>21</sup> Roger Chartier, "Text, Symbols and Frenchness," *Journal of Modern History* 57, no. 4 (1985), 685.

<sup>22</sup> In literary criticism, this was explored in a masterly fashion by Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

University – but it is paradoxical that Jack Goody, the founder of a notable anthropology of writing, should be absent from the bibliography of the anthropology of culture as texts and texts about cultures. It is possible to trace a parallel between the distinction that the historian of the book draws between texts and non-textual practices, and Goody's premise that writing does not replace orality: both communicative mediations intertwine in interfaces in which oral expressions and dispositions affect the forms of writing, and writing conditions orality, even in contexts in which literacy is not the norm.<sup>23</sup> The social and cognitive effects of texts depend on the writing system in question, the medium, the relations of power they generate and of which they are also the expression, and the distribution of written objects and the uses to which they are put.<sup>24</sup> Chartier and Goody are just two social scientists among many who – in treating writing, reading, the media of communication (including orality), teaching systems and cognitive processes as the subject of historiographical and ethnographic research – reveal the limitations of post-modern rhetoric that treats text and translation as metaphors or even as ontologies of the contemporary world. Conversely, it is surprising that the history of the book and the anthropology of writing have not promoted empirical studies of translation as a practice in itself that seeks to emerge from invisibility.

Investigations into translations, translators and other dimensions of the social world that surround this concrete historical practice were led by authors in the academic sphere in Israel and the Netherlands, countries with languages that are peripheral in the global linguistic system. From the 1970s on, at the heart of comparative literature and

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<sup>23</sup> "Writing may affect the procedures (that is, the cognitive operations) and content of the knowledge of individuals in a society, even though they are unable to read, let alone to write. Scribal cultures were of this kind, so too were many colonial ones. Even non-literate peoples or cultures may acquire, be influenced by, even be dominated by forms of knowledge developed through literacy. It is possible, therefore, for literates to communicate the products of writing to non-literates by oral means. It is also possible that those who were able to read may have to reproduce orally, even among themselves, the knowledge they have acquired, either by reading or by having someone read to them." Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 114-5.

<sup>24</sup> The Cambridge anthropologist proposes an ethnography of texts, precisely in order to verify the scope of the effects of the dissemination and uses of written culture. His proposal is complemented by the incisive sociology of texts proposed by Donald F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

socio-semiotics, Itamar Even-Zohar developed polysystem theory, which considers translation as a complex, dynamic activity governed both by the comparative properties of language and by social interests.<sup>25</sup> This gave rise to an interest in cultural markets, the economic and political mediators of symbolic exchanges, the variability of intellectual practices, and the scope and limitations of power associated with the intervention in and legitimation of cultures through translation. Since the early 1990s, these lines of research, which clearly reactivated the relationship between literature and sociology (a very dynamic field during the 1960s but one that was visibly deactivated in the 1980s), were amplified by Abram de Swaan and Johan Heilbron's theory on the global linguistic system, transferring Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory to the hierarchy and inequality of languages and their interconnections through structures of centers and peripheries.<sup>26</sup> For the Dutch sociologists, the international power of languages is objectivized in the volume of translations which are given concrete expression in the international publishing market. More than 60 percent of book translations come from English. On this basis, English is described as hypercentral. In the face of this overwhelming domination, French and German (and also Russian until the fall of the Soviet Union), can be seen as central languages, accounting for around 10 percent of the global flow of translations. Spanish, Italian, Danish, Swedish, and Polish represent about one percent and are semi-peripheral languages, to differentiate them from the remaining languages, which are clearly peripheral. This makes translations a conspicuous indicator of the structures of inequality which reflect the symbolic power of the competition between national cultures. This competition can only be understood historically and spatially, as a variable of a market in symbolic goods. Since the late 1990s, Heilbron and other researchers at the Centre de Sociologie Européenne (CSE), including Gisèle Sapiro, Ioana Popa and Pascale Casanova, have undertaken innovative projects

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<sup>25</sup> Itamar Even-Zohar, "Polysystem Theory," *Poetics Today* 1, no. 1-2 (Autumn 1979), 287–310.

<sup>26</sup> Johan Heilbron, "Toward a Sociology of Translation. Book Translation as a Cultural World-system," *European Journal of Social Theory* 2, no. 4 (1999), 429–44; Abram de Swaan, *Words of the World* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001).

following the premises established by Pierre Bourdieu, founder of the CSE, at a lecture in Freiburg (in 1989) on “The Social Conditions of the International Circulation of Ideas.”<sup>27</sup>

It was within this ongoing research program that I pursued a variety of areas of work. I researched the expression and meaning of the translation of books by Brazilian authors in Argentina during the twentieth century; and I also coordinated a collective research project into the translation of books in the social sciences and humanities in Argentina, studying how books came into Spanish from French, English, Italian, German and Portuguese. These empirical studies led to the discovery of some significant facts: for example, confirmation that, despite the belief that Brazilian literature is not treated as part of Latin American literature in Argentina, this is the publishing market where, after France, most Brazilian authors have been translated since 1900,<sup>28</sup> and in social sciences and the humanities, in the period from 1990 to 2015, the publication of translations from French, at around 1,700 titles, was twice the volume of translations from English in Argentina.<sup>29</sup>

Researching these topics means combining methodological scales and strategies drawn from both macro (or global) studies and micro (or ethnographic) ones.<sup>30</sup> My guiding hypotheses involved extensive and complex data collection, operating with categories from literature, political science, and the sociology of internationalization.

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<sup>27</sup> Many of the researchers on this program have published texts under the coordination of Gisèle Sapiro. See her *Translatio. Le marché de la traduction en France à l'heure de la mondialisation* (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2008) and Gisèle Sapiro ed., *Les sciences humaines en traduction: Les livres français aux États-Unis, au Royaume-Uni, et en Argentine* (Paris: CESSP – EHESS – Éditions de l'Institut Français, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Gustavo Sorá, “Un échange dénié. La traduction d'auteurs brésiliens en Argentine,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 145 (2002), 61–70; Gustavo Sorá, *Traducir el Brasil. Una antropología de la circulación internacional de ideas* (Buenos Aires: Libros del Zorzal, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> Gustavo Sorá and Alejandro Dujovne, “Translation of Western Social and Human Sciences in Argentina. A Comparative Study of Translations from French, English, German, Italian and Portuguese,” in Johan Heilbron, Gustavo Sorá and Thibaud Boncourt eds., *The Social and Human Sciences in Global Power Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2018).

<sup>30</sup> Marie-France Garcia-Parpet, Romain Lecler and Gustavo Sorá, “Foires, salons et marchés internationaux. Circulation des biens symboliques et mondialisation des places marchandes,” in *Guide de l'enquête globale en sciences sociales*, eds. Johanna Siméant, Romain Lecler, Cécile Rabot, Bertrand Réau, Sébastien Roux and Anne-Catherine Wagner (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2015), 95–114.

This is not incompatible with the possibility of adding ethnography as a strategy to record the details and intensity of human interactions and scenarios that would otherwise be overlooked. Ethnography provides a denser observation and understanding of the agents, places, practices and “imponderables of everyday real life” that revolve around translation. Given the lack of space to characterize my ethnography of translation, I will draw on fieldwork recorded during the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2013, to provide a synthetic representation of its value in capturing the diversity and inequality inherent in translation as observed at the most significant annual event attended by agents competing in an international market in symbolic goods.



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5

Image 2 shows the stand of Carmen Balcells, the dominant Barcelona literary agency that sells the publishing rights of 80 percent of the most prestigious and best-selling Hispanic American authors. This stand was located at the center of the Spanish publishing sector, in international pavilion 5.1. Image 1 shows the center for literary agents and scouts, the true nerve center of publishing Fordism. It is only accessible to accredited professionals and is the place where rights are negotiated for exchanges between all languages,

sometimes for seven-figure sums. This pavilion (6.0) is located at the heart of the fair, at an equal distance between the power centers of global publishing, the pavilion for English language publishers (8), German publishers (3) and French ones (6.1).<sup>31</sup> The remaining images (3, 4 and 5) are of a “cultural policy” sector promoted by the organizers of the fair (Ausstellungs- und Messe GmbH) to support bibliodiversity. The Weltempfang Centre for politics, literature and translation is located in a marginal corner of the physical space of the Frankfurt Bookfair, in pavilion 5.0, next to a “neighborhood” that houses some twenty or so promising small publishers, invited and funded by AuM GmbH. Here one can find translators, intellectuals, editors and activists who attend Frankfurt without a stand, on their own behalf. As shown in image 4, academics, writers, representatives of NGOs and public institutions hold events as part of their struggle to halt the cultural homogenization represented by the globalization of publishing and the supremacy of English. The *Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Literatur aus Afrika, Asien und Lateinamerika e. V.* [Society for the Promotion of African, Asian and Latin American Literature] (image 5) is an NGO that promotes the translation of authors from peripheral countries. It was established in 1980 by Peter Weidhaas, director of the Frankfurt Bookfair from 1973 to 2003, by the publisher Hermann Schulz, literary agent Ray-Güde Mertins (specializing in Portuguese-language authors) and by translator and teacher Peter Ripken. The organization, originally called the ‘Third World Literary Agency’, was supported by funds from the German Protestant church and subsequently received subsidies from the German Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Weidhaas’s career is an interesting example of the basis on which a European can become a political representative of Latin American culture.<sup>32</sup> His personal history is characterized by a sharp break with the Nazi past of his father and his paternal grandfather, and erratic and

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<sup>31</sup> In Gustavo Sorá, *A History of Book Publishing in Contemporary Latin America* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 197-198, I present one of my ethnographies of the Frankfurt Book Fair which includes an analysis and graphic presentation of this axis of international publishing power.

<sup>32</sup> Gustavo Sorá, “Peter Weidhaas y América Latina. Internacionalización y politización de las ferias de libros,” in *Promoción literaria, cultural y traducción en la actualidad. Ferias internacionales del libro e invitados de honor*, ed. Iolanda Galanes Santos, Ana Luna Alonso and Carmen Villarino Pardo (Bern: Peter Lang, 2021).

critical migrations in search of his own personal and professional destiny. After teaching courses in graphic design and publishing in Switzerland and Denmark, he returned to his home country when he was offered a position as an assistant in a section of the AuM that was responsible for organizing German bookfairs abroad. His first mission was to Argentina. In Córdoba he met his first wife, Dora de la Vega, a translator at the Goethe Institute. She came from a family of scientists and left-wing activists and her sister had been a political prisoner during the military dictatorship (1966–1973).<sup>33</sup> Weidhaas was drawn by the intensity of the political commitment of Latin American intellectuals: “And so I hit upon Latin America [...] It was exactly what somebody like me needed to find an identity. Someone who, like the Kafka character K, felt guilty without knowing why.”<sup>34</sup> Argentina is among the countries that Weidhaas’s NGO helps to translate and, partly thanks to this, it is the peripheral country from which most authors have been translated into German. There was a temporary change in Argentina’s position in the global publishing scene as a result of the country’s exposure due to its being Guest of Honor in 2010. For the first time, an Argentine government supported the internationalization of its publishers and promoted a policy of subsidies for the translation of Argentine authors (Programa Sur).

This is a broad outline of something that can only be revealed through ethnography, the result of spending extended periods of time patiently observing the social spaces constructed by the protagonists of the human contexts the ethnographer seeks to comprehend. Translators exist within networks of intellectual and cultural market relationships alongside writers, publishers, politicians and even those from the religious sphere, who intervene from a range of positions and interests to struggle for the production of translations at a global scale. Weidhaas would agree with the aims of

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<sup>33</sup> Argentina underwent several military coups from 1930 onwards. The dictatorship in question here followed a self-proclaimed “Revolución Argentina” [“Argentinian Revolution”] that overthrew the constitutional government in June 1966. The more widely known “Proceso de Reorganización Nacional” [“National Reorganization Process”], often referred to as “the last dictatorship,” lasted from 1976 until 1983 (translator’s note).

<sup>34</sup> Peter Weidhaas, *See you in Frankfurt. Life at the Helm of the Largest Book Fair in the World* (New York: Locus, 2010).

Clifford and his colleagues regarding the consequences of migrations, the decentering of identities, of hybridization and the policies of an unequal, contradictory, unstable world. A European can be a better global representative of Latin America than a native of that continent. But the structures have not disappeared due to the effects of theory. The space of the fair demonstrates that conclusively, as if nothing had changed since imperial times.

It was not my intention to simply describe contrasting theoretical positions, but rather to consider the conditions under which the act of translation can be understood as a conspicuous and dynamic social and historical phenomenon. It is essential that anthropological theory does not lose sight of its ethnographic program to fall into the seductive discursive games of philosophy, semiotics, or cultural criticism. Finally, I believe we can state that translation is a symbolic and social act worthy of ethnographic study, and that anthropology must consider translation as a key component of the analysis of a present that is threatened by Globish.